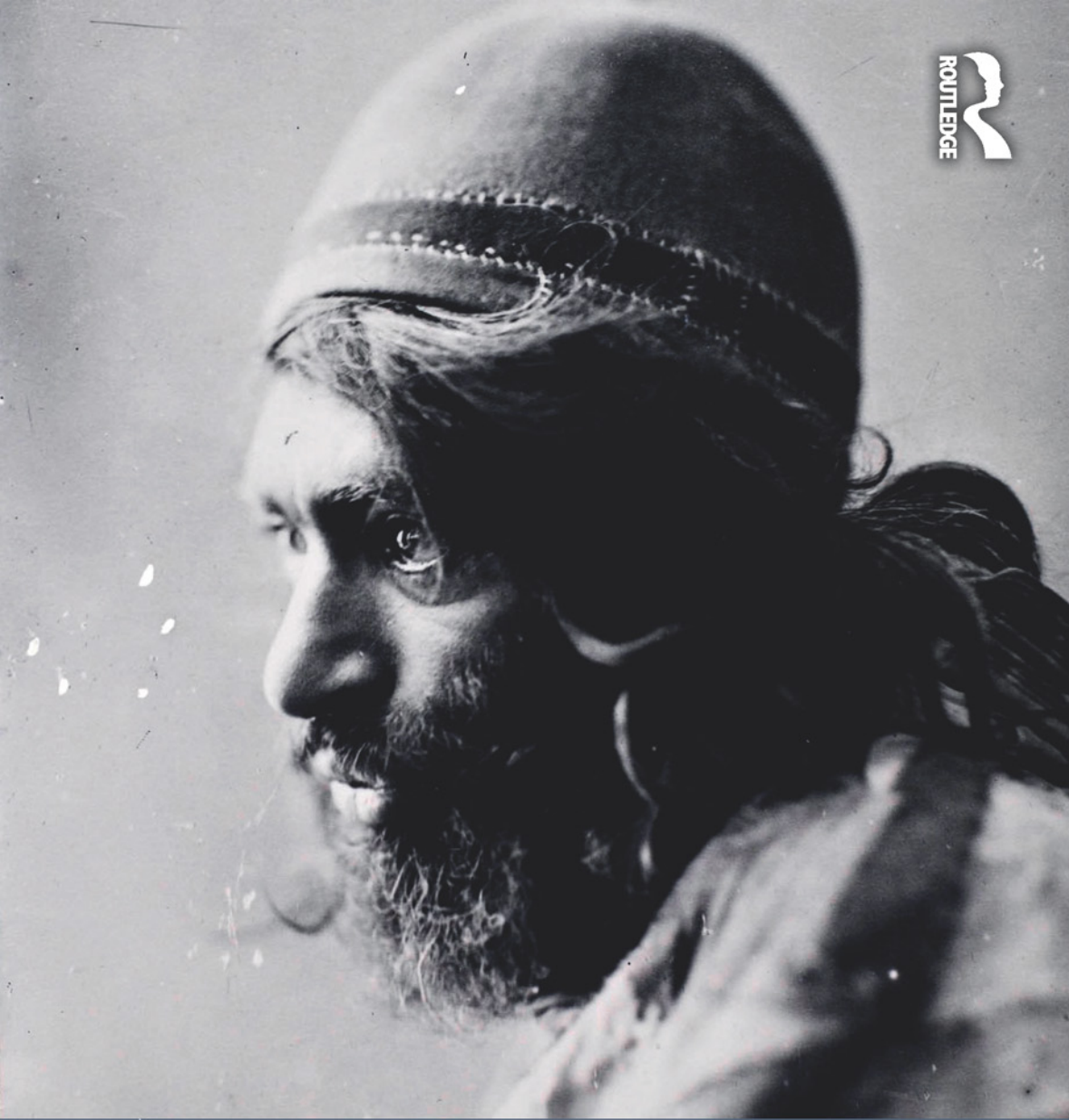

SUFI POLITICAL THOUGHT

Milad Milani

Sufi Political Thought

Sufism is generally perceived as being spiritually focused and about the development of the self. However, Sufi orders have been involved historically as important civic and political actors in the Muslim world, having participated extensively in inter-faith dialogue and political challenges to religious orthodoxy. This book presents a comprehensive overview of the Sufi political tradition, both historically and in its present form. It outlines how Sufi thought has developed, examines how Sufism has been presented both by scholars and by Sufis themselves, and considers Sufis' active political roles. It argues that Sufis – frequently well educated, well travelled and imaginative – have been well placed to engage with other faiths and absorb their ideas into Islam; but that they have also been, because they understand other faiths, well placed to understand the distinctiveness of Islam, and thereby act as the guardians of Islam's core ideas and values.

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For my parents,
who sacrificed their world for mine.

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Foreword

Sufism has, in the West, been treated as primarily the leading branch of Islamic mysticism and hence characterised by its a-political, esoteric, and passive character. For example, the German sociologist Max Weber, whose work continues to dominate much of the sociological study of religion, described Sufism in terms of its 'passionate devotion', its cultivation of ecstasy, and its 'joyous lyricism' in his book *The Sociology of Religion* (1922). He thought that, because of its 'irrational and extraordinary character', Sufism did not produce a methodical control over the life world. In that regard, it was unlike the asceticism that was typical of the Protestant sects. While noting the missionary influence of popular Sufism in the global diffusion of Islam, Weber nowhere connects Sufism with politics or the state. Sufism spread, not as a warrior religion in Weber's terms, but as a network of saints and their orders or *tariqahs*.

Against this background, Milad Milani's encyclopaedic study of the origins, development, and continuity of Sufism is a challenge to many taken-for-granted assumptions that persist in contemporary scholarship. *Sufi Political Thought* is, however, not only in confrontation with conventional sociological interpretations, but it is also a challenge to the orthodox Sunni interpretation of Sufism as a sectarian deviation from the mainstream. For Milani, there is no stationary, ideal, puritanical, or continuous 'Islam'. Rather, Islam is an open tradition within which Sufism has been the major conduit of cultural exchange between religion and its external environment. The heterogeneity and complexity of Sufism is not a deviation from Islam but it is rather a living, dynamic, and fruitful engagement with other cultures and traditions, especially Christianity, from an Islamic standpoint. Consequently, Sufism represents the cosmopolitan, urbane, and outward-looking face of Islamic tradition(s). It has been open to the outside world throughout its existence. One major influence was, of course, from Persia, but Milani sees Sufism as essentially Islam in and through Asia. However, Sufism has drawn from many sources including, and especially, Christian mysticism and monasticism, giving a special place in its theology for Jesus as the perfect Sufi. In addition, Sufism has a tradition of martyrs who, like their Christian counter-parts, are witnesses to the working of the divine in human history.

As an intermediary between the world of Islam and the external world, Sufism has continuously mediated the religious and the political, while never allowing

that dialectic to unfold into religious withdrawal or political dominance. Consequently, Sufis had to constantly negotiate a role between different states and different cultures as part of its external framework, and to negotiate a relationship with other Islamic traditions. In these diverse encounters they developed a politics of knowledge (what is authentic? What is true?) and a politics of religion (what is valid? What is authoritative?). Politics could never be avoided.

In modern times, Muslims, faced with the challenge of western secularism, have, perhaps unsurprisingly, constructed an authentic, puritan, ideal Islam that has sought to close itself off from both external cultural and religious forces. Milani thus understands the Islamic world as caught in a struggle between an exclusive and narrow puritanism promoting a selective, integrated, and idealistic view of Islamic history and an inclusive, evolving, and dynamic Islam through the medium of Sufi spirituality.

In the history of Islam, the Sufi brotherhoods played a major role in the spread of Sufism as a popular religion. Thus, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, perhaps the greatest western historian of Islam, noted the importance of the cult of dead Sufi saints and their tombs in his work *The Venture of Islam* (1974), whose human qualities and sympathies offered a more compassionate message than the austere doctrine of the remoteness of the Oneness of God.

There is a widespread view that the influence of Sufism has declined over time. Hodgson noted that as early as the eighteenth century the Sufi *tariqahs* had become burdened with the weight of 'endowed property and popular superstition'. Milani, through case studies of spiritual leaders, shows the ongoing reach and influence of modern *tariqahs*, especially in the West where they became popular in the twentieth century. A key figure was Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927) who founded Universal Sufism to promote spirituality as the unity of all religions. Meher Baba (d. 1969) founded the American order of Sufism Reoriented. Apart from these individual figures, various Sufi orders have been successfully transplanted such as Naqshbandis, Chishtis, Qadiris, Mevlevs, Alawis, Shadhilis, and Tijanis.

Sufi Political Thought will bring about an important reinterpretation of Sufism not as a passive spirituality of mystics. By demonstrating the continuous engagement of Sufis with the political, he has established a new research agenda. The volume will do much to reshape our understanding of the broad scope of Muslim religious experience over the centuries and across the many branches of Islam.

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Acknowledgements

This book is a continuation of my exploration of Sufism as political agency and device. My intention in writing this book is for it to assist those interested in considering Sufism as part of the wider story of Islam and Muslim interaction with other religious worlds, particularly the Christian.

Initial thanks extend to Bryan Turner, who graciously invited me to consider writing a second book on Sufism, and for offering to give it a home in his series with Routledge. More than this, I am indebted to Bryan for his uncompromising study of Islam, which encouraged me to write with greater candour and reflexivity about the topic.

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1 Introduction

Understanding Sufism as Islam and politics

'What is Sufism'? Phenomenologically, Sufism is, like most religious and spiritual traditions, both a heuristic process and a method in that it encompasses both the *journey* towards something and the *way* to achieve that end. In the case of Sufism, however, the tradition provides a restricted framework within which the acolyte can spiritually explore and study the experience of Islam. Operating from within this parameter, Sufism becomes a 'Muslim hermeneutic' in that it additionally offers its own method and theory of interpretation of the Islamic canon that is characteristically mystical.

While the origins of Sufism remain a point of historical contention, and more suitably a matter of historiography, it can be defined as a form of interior religion practiced by an unknown number of Muslims around the world. Since later Sufi chroniclers compiled the tradition retrospectively, it is difficult to ascertain a comprehensive answer to *what* Sufism is and *how* it is to be understood historically. Broad studies of Sufism have generally held Sufism as being intrinsic to early Islamic practice, and have assumed it to literally be there from the beginning, often held to have originated with the practices of Muhammad. Historicisations of Sufism, however, have tended to restrict Sufism as a new development in the medieval period and one to have specifically originated in the middle of the ninth century. Yet, as hinted above, Sufism is a mode, among many others, of interpreting Islam from the inside, facilitated by its own 'reading' of the past. It is, therefore, both a historical and phenomenological concern which will be explored in the pursuing chapters of this book.

The problem of writing a history of Sufism is a definitional one, which results in a debate about origins. This aside, the Sufi tradition is not conventionally impervious to documentation, nor has scholarship lacking want in reconstructing historical Sufism (cf., Knysh, 2010; Green, 2012). To follow the historical trail, Sufism initially emerges in a gradual fashion in the backdrop of the process of conversion to Islam among non-Arab peoples of the conquered territories, predominantly in the Iran and Iraq regions. Based on medieval biographical materials, there is evidence to suggest that Sufism grew out of a need for these converts (from Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian ancestry) to adapt their understanding of Islam to aspects of their own heritage, and as part of the process of defining their own identity as clients to the establishing Arab Muslim empire (Bulliet, 1994).

It is, therefore, arguable that Sufism does not have a singular point of origin in either a specific event or a central figurehead, unlike Islam which traditionally has its origins in the person and revelation of Muhammad. This is not to say, however, that Muhammad is not the phenomenological foundation of Sufi understanding. Herein lies a subtler point about the hermeneutics of history that needs to be contextualised in its proper period and framework. Whatever non-Islamic religious elements have been appropriated by the Sufis historically, these have not been without a foundational basis in the Qur'an. The emergence of Sufism is better described as the result of several processes that relate to regional typography. First, on a micro-level, its rise to prominence can be considered as being closely connected to the success of its innovative interpretation of religion and adaptation of Islamic religious practice to regional customs as found across the medieval Muslim world. Secondly, on a macro-level, the rise of Sufism is concurrent with the shift from an Arab-centred religious dynasty to a universal empire increasingly defined by its vast majority (and growing population) of non-Arab Muslims. The third step of this process broadly relates to the delineation of a mystical tradition and associated cultural production (cf., Milani, 2012a; 2012b).

All of this is to pose a key question: what is political about Sufism? Or how is being a Sufi political? Sufism represents a version of the Islamic past; it is an interpretation of Islam peculiar to mystical reading of the Islamic canon. Sufis are political by participating in the perpetuation of their Islamic narrative. Islam is first historically manifest as a polity, embodying a synthesised religious and political ideology. Yet, what remained dormant is what Muhammad Taha (1909–1985) alleged as the first message of Islam. This came to light in the works of Montgomery Watt as distinct periodic stages of Muhammad's career in Mecca and Medina, which indicate a juxtaposed, though not disassociated, religiosity. Sufism can be tied into this theme as an early Islamic method of extracting what might be deemed to be a spiritual reading of the Qur'an. Sufis thrived during a time that was simultaneously attuned to the growth of jurisprudence. Notable Sufi figures were educated Muslims who navigated the religious terrain disseminating the mysteries of Islam without opposing the Law. What makes Sufism political is the role it has aspired to play in shaping Muslim polity. Being a Sufi becomes political when certain interpretations of religion challenge the mainstream. What will become clear in this book is the varied nature of Sufi political thought from an examination of several samples from history and contemporary Sufism.

As a subject of study, Sufism is nuanced and definitionally complex. A fact that is also representative of the reality of its tradition. Therefore, in writing this book, certain sensitivities are taken into consideration. First, that its approach should be both discerning to scholarship and representative of the tradition under scrutiny. There is no point in speaking about Sufism without taking into consideration the value of the living tradition to which it is beholden and what this means to those that are representative of its praxis.

As such, the methods utilised in this book are derived from the discipline of studies in religion, which includes the history of religions and comparative religion, and which is polymethodic and multidisciplinary. This approach allows for

the flexibility to examine and discuss Sufism both as a phenomenon of historical and human enquiry. In this task the book engages both the historical and sociological disciplines, but through the lens of its primary focus, giving special attention to often glossed-over religious subject matter. The signalled approach will also assist in appreciating the ways in which religion comes to be understood, processed, and embodied as a living reality in the consciousness of the agent, which then has its subsequent impact upon the social and political spheres. Second, that the resulting research should provide something familiar but previously unrecognised; known, but not understood; same, but different. This second qualification should not only contribute, and relate, to more than one branch of knowledge (that is, it must be interdisciplinary), but it should also carry a component that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries to create a holistic approach (transdisciplinary). In doing so, the aim is not just to cross disciplinary boundaries, but also to think through the subject itself in order to create new conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and interpretative innovations that bring together newly formed understandings not limited by discipline-specific approaches that seek to address a common problem from varying angles.

The first two chapters of this book are designed to provide the reader with a background to the complications of typecasting Sufism and locating it within academic discourse. They are, therefore, stand-alone chapters that do not necessarily spill over into the rest of the book and, as such, are paradigmatic of the intention of the book rather than prescriptive as to its content. The first chapter aims to cut through conceptual misperceptions and problems relating to the typology of Sufism. The second chapter examines the concerns around discussing the subject of Sufism in academic context. Both are necessary for the commencement of setting up a framework for the study of Sufi political thought. The middle four chapters are historiographical in nature, focused on the meeting point of religion and politics in the Islamic history. The last two chapters are approaches from historical anthropology, which expound on charismatic leadership and the experience of religion in the body.

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2 A framework for the study of Sufi political thought

Although Sufism pushes the limit of Muslim experience and understanding, it never finds itself beyond the borders of Islam. By its very nature, Sufism is an active force, asserting its sphere of influence in Muslim public life, but this, too, is in line with the Muslim *modus operandi*. Within the Muslim sphere, then, Sufism is proactive in the same way the early Muslim frontiersmen were, and before them, the Companions of the Prophet, and before them, Muhammad (the Prophet of Islam) was in establishing a distinct religious polity during the second half of his career in Medina. The history of the *mu'minun* ('believers') is one of perpetuating, rather than making, Islam, and so the *mutasawwifa* ('mystics') are one of the most effective early Muslim movements undertaking the distinctive task of propagating the *experience* of the faith. The process of institutionalising *tasawwuf* ('mysticism') as the standard-bearer of Sufi Islam is, in large part, a history that is entangled with Islamic political thought, though in this book I am specifically underlining it as being recognised in its own right as Sufi political thought. Sufism, as all Muslims later know it, materialised variously as disparate ascetic fraternities, especially in Khurasan, some currents of which were gradually appropriated and socialised, but a particular brand of which was brought into line with (Sunni) orthopraxy. This was the power and influence of the Sufism of Baghdad to establish the Sufi status quo as well as its canon.

There can, therefore, be no doubt that historically, the Sufi tradition is a product of the Asian continent; more specifically, western Asia was the birthplace of the great mystics of Islam. The story of Sufi political activity does not terminate in the medieval era, but continues to the present day, and this book will engage the Sufi realpolitik of a specific contemporary case study. What the historical and present-day instances convey, despite Sufism's subsequent domestication, is on the one hand the utilisation of the 'Sufi' label for the persistence of alternative voices within the fold of Islam reinventing tradition and faith; and on the other hand, an oppositional force calling into question Islamic fundamentalism at every turn. In this book, I will examine Sufi political thought in relation to two domains of Sufi agency or political activism: the politics of theology and the politics of religion. With regards the former, Sufis have played a major role in challenging mainstream (literalist) interpretations of Islam; they have worked within the frame of Islam, and have shaped the religion from within. With regards the latter, Sufis

have functioned as de facto Islamic ambassadors to other religions, especially Christianity.

Such a discussion must begin with a Sufi figure of great notoriety, al-Hallaj (d. 922): the example par excellence of Sufi political agency, the truly political Sufi whose domain of activity and legacy is unbound by geography. The occupation of this Sufi of Asia comes to a dramatic close by his own determining on the political stage of Baghdad, and having had the purposefulness of his intentionality secure his legacy post-mortem. Yet, the politics of Hallaj cannot be understood outside of the context in which his contemporaries were at work in the Islamic capital of Baghdad. For this, I will single out Junayd (d. 910) as representative of a 'Sufism' congruous with the sprouting Sunni mainstream. The example of the formative period of Sufism, especially in Baghdad in its entirety, that is to say, the activities of the Sufis and their engagement with or absence from the public debates on orthodoxy, defines in part what is described in this book as Sufi political thought. The remaining portion of this activity constitutes Sufi involvement in the defence against non-Muslim religious ideas. The term 'defence', however, is used with a major caveat: it is not to be understood in the conventional sense of keeping something out, but as the principle of ensuring it has no life of its own on the inside. The Sufi method of defence was more akin to taking what was 'other' and making it familiar, Islamic.

This process was the main principle of Islamification that, over time, shaped the Muslim world. The Muslim civilisation was an open civilisation by virtue of the fact that it did not bring or produce something of its own, but rather absorbed the cultures and civilisations that were already there upon its arrival; Islam was infused by non-Muslim culture, which was Islamised. Islam is, by definition, faith that has no culture of its own, but which expanded through the establishment of its polity to *make* what was 'other' its own. Sufism is generally perceived as spiritually focused and about the development of the self, a perception that many Sufis perpetuate through their self-representation. However, Sufi orders have been historically involved as important civic and political actors within the Muslim world by engaging in inter-faith dialogue, political challenges to religious orthodoxy, and activism. This has important implications for understanding the development of what is often referred to as the 'heart' of Islam. Sufis generally present the perception of Rumi and love poetry, and this may be personal and individual bias of some 'new age' Sufis, but at a deeper level Sufi orders, groups, and organisations are political, active in inter-faith dialogue, and engage in changing society. In many ways, Islam is indefinable as a constant without the documented intervals where particular forms of agency have perpetuated the faith and reshaped the tradition throughout time. That is to say, Islam is an abstract idea that is given meaning through Muslim agency. Muslims are the agents of history that perpetuate the faith through the ages. What is unique about the Sufis, amongst other agents of this perpetuating force, is that their movement retained the mystical component of the ontological trajectory of Muhammad. In the absence of the Prophet, their mysticism, and their role as mystics, fulfilled a feature of Islamic religiosity that perpetuated the experiential knowledge of revelation.

As the mystical branch of Islam, Sufism would not even be possible without the role of the mystics, the point of origin of whom is, ontologically speaking, Muhammad, the quintessential mystic. In this special sense, then, it is Sufism that belongs to the mystics, and not the other way around. The Sufis do make the unique claim of spiritual union with God, but this is a distinctive manoeuvre in the face of those with temporal power. Notwithstanding, the absence of the Sufi in politics does not equate with non-engagement; a symbolic withdrawal from worldly affairs is not equivalent to the denial of it. The politics of Sufism is a method of sidestepping power whilst maintaining authority. With Sufism, the suppression of subjectivity returns in a new circumstance to implement its final dissolution for the sake of the absolute through imitation. The Sufi subjectivity is temporarily aroused by the desire to imitate his or her master, or *pir*, as the first step towards ultimate annihilation of individuality in the Godhead. This introspective part of Sufi political thought is representative of the broader Islamic disposition for non-autonomous identification, but one that challenges the process by which it is derived. Ultimately, Sufism is about the dissolution of any remnant of individuation, thus fulfilling the Islamic decree *inna lillahi wa-inna ilayhi raji'una* ("Indeed, we belong to Allah and to Him is our return", 2: 156).

One of the more controversial aspects of Sufi history is that it presents scholars who study it as a major alternative to how Islam is perceived and practiced today, but this is not to be understood as testament to non-synchronous Muslim credence. Islam is today a global religion, and historically an open realm, harbouring adherents across multiple nations with diverse ethnicities. Whilst Muslims are united by the underlying universalistic principles of their faith, the way that they experience Islam varies based on their interpretation of the religion and justification of authoritative lineage. In this perspective, Sufis, too, are a diversified group within the existing dynamics of Muslim life. In particular, Sufi history contains its own unique constellation of central figures and associated groups, all with varying degrees of affinity to religious orthodoxy, ranging from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal.

A Muslim typology for a discursive model

For the purposes of clarification of what has been discussed hitherto, it is important to offer a broad outline of a Muslim typology. The categorisations contained within the typology help to discern the type of Muslim being defined; for example, whether one is speaking about an extremist, revivalist, or secular Muslim. I do this with reference to a simplified typology. The typology is made up of components that are ultimately interchangeable based on how they come to be defined and conceptualised. But it should be remembered that this typology serves primarily as a discursive model rather than a categorical tool.

The types of Muslims being defined will be isolated, though not unconditionally determined, through the classification of four categories. These are: types, orientation, sub-types, and attributes. As a further qualifier, I capitalise the words used in this typology to populate the categories so that they may be distinguished

from their use in the lower case, since some may be interchangeably applicable throughout the typology. This allows for the word 'radical', for instance, to be used both as a sub-type (capitalised) in the typology and at the same time being applied as a modifier for other sub-types (in the lower case), for example, 'radical Liberal'. Although capitalisation is employed here for the sake of practicality, it will not be applied as a general rule for discussing either of the categories as they arise in later chapters.

In its simplest sense, types indicate the orientation of Muslim attitude. For example, a Muslim might be a Traditionalist or a Modernist. This is the first determinant in the typology. It indicates whether a Muslim is Conservative or Progressive in their approach to Islam. I would like highlight that this is an important point because the typology is a tool for measuring the way that Muslims interpret their religion based on the manner in which they position themselves in relation to the past; that is, to the events of Islamic history.

Through the definition of the type and orientation, sub-types emerge. Each type and orientation combination, for example, Traditionalist and Conservative or Modernist and Progressive, make up the second determinant in the typology. They indicate the sub-types as follows and are relevant to the combination type: Radical, Fundamentalist, Moderate, Reformist, and Liberal. This further defines the way in which the agent is defined with regard to their understanding of the past. For example, they may be Traditionalist by type, Conservative in attitude, and Fundamentalist in practice. I should also say that there are basic limitations set on the outcome of sub-types, for the purposes of this typology, depending on the initial combination of type and orientation. For example, a Traditionalist and Conservative cannot be a Modernist and Progressive at the same time. As such, the outcome of either combination will yield a limited number of sub-types. Under the category of the Traditionalist Conservative type, I would surmise the activity of the Radical and Fundamentalist Muslim. Similarly, the Modernist Progressive type would infer the activity of Reformist and Liberal. In between these, the sub-type, Moderate, must be placed because it can be such that both a Traditionalist Conservative and a Modernist Progressive can be Moderate in their approach to practicing Islam.

In the final categorisation, the combination of sub-types provide further definition on the resulting attribute of the Muslim type. In order to derive the attributes there needs to be a pairing of the sub-types. In this case, Radical and Fundamentalist are reserved for the category of the Traditionalist Conservative type orientation, and Reformist and Liberal for the Modernist Progressive. The Moderate category once again acts as a medium between the paired sub-types as indicated, yielding its own attributes. The attributes are defined as: Extremist, Revivalist, Secular, and Revisionist. Here, the Radical and Fundamentalist produce the Extremist; the Fundamentalist and Moderate, the Revivalist; the Moderate and Reformist, the Secular; and the Reformist and Liberal, the Revisionist.

In considering the resulting attributes, a Traditionalist Conservative cannot be Liberal or a Reformist in their approach to Islam. It might be possible for a Modernist Progressive to be Radical in their approach, but a Modernist Progressive

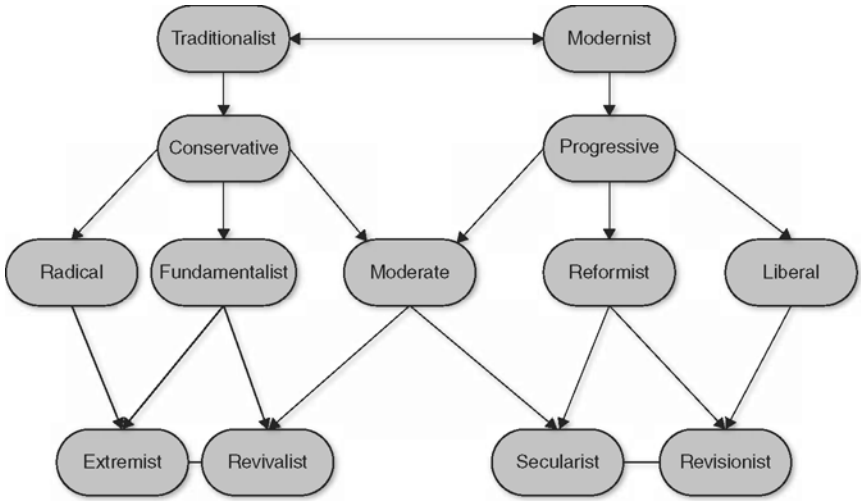

Figure 2.1 Typology

cannot be a Fundamentalist or an Extremist. For the purposes of the typology offered here, I have limited the use of Radical to the Traditionalist Conservative orientation, as the Reformist attribute has sufficed to indicate a counterweight for the Modernist Progressive orientation. Also to be noted, secular is defined here as the Muslim who practices Islam in the Westphalian sense of the separation of church and state.

Seeing the past through the present

As a discursive model, the typology is useful in exploring the complexity of being Islamic; this will be discussed in chapter four with reference to historical periods and the dynamics of religion and politics. Indeed, historical periods of Muslim rule can be defined by the presiding mood of the Muslim types in power. The example might be that at a particular period, let us say, at the height of Muslim power during the peak of its civilisation, there was a pervasive cultured sense of religiosity informed by the achievements of Islamic arts and sciences. One might term this a period defined by the overwhelming sense of Islamic humanism (Goodman, 2003). In contrast, there were at this time, and also later periods of Islamic history, types that were of a religious sentiment defined as less urbane, and perhaps others defined as more puritanical in tone and application. Discussing the relationship between religion and politics requires an appreciation of such sensibilities, directed by what I am signalling, as religious mood, attitude, and interpretation. These subtle changes impact on the manner in which religion comes to be used in society and in politics. All of this will be discussed in detail throughout this book with reference to cases made about definition, but suffice it to say, the

way that Muslims come to define themselves is specifically complicated by the manner in which they position themselves in relation to the past.

In my understanding of Islamic history, there are two major arteries of interpretation: the fundamentalist and the humanist. The former is representative of a traditionalist conservative mode that is revivalist in nature. The latter is representative of a modernist progressive mode that is secular in nature. The humanist factor is a product of a gradually emerging civilisational consciousness within the Muslim world that becomes an active and permeating force, which I refer to specifically as 'civilisational intelligence'. This will be the topic of exploration in chapter four. My use of 'civilisational' rather than 'humanist' is to distinguish, though not separate, the focus of my hypothesis from Goodman's discussion of Islamic humanism (2003). Goodman's book argues that key Muslim thinkers continued to pursue essentially humanistic, rational, and scientific discourses in the quest for knowledge, meaning, and values, despite the rising mood of religious authoritarianism in medieval Islamic civilisation. Sampling from a variety of Muslim writings – love poetry, history, philosophy, theology – he makes a convincing argument that medieval Islam was open to individualism, occasional secularism, scepticism, and even, he argues, liberalism. My endeavour in this book is far simpler and more modest in that I make the case, from a historiographical standpoint, that greater attention needs to be paid to the impact that puritanical and urbane sensibilities have had on our view of Islamic history. Their role in influencing the reading of history spares neither the insider nor the outsider. My relabelling the humanistic with civilisational is so as not to duplicate Goodman's work, and yet to emphasise the larger view of the historical imperative in permitting the humanism to emerge in the first place. With this in mind, by explaining the humanistic element as an urbane and ultimately a civilisational prerogative, it enables a critical assessment of historicisations that assert essentialist views of the past. For example, 1) those that hold that Islam in its 'authentic' form is peaceful, refined, and humanistic and 2) those that hold that Islam in its 'pure' form is endowed with clearly defined prescriptions to be followed to the letter. It may very well be that Islam was, and is, all of these things in the experience of some Muslims then and now, but it is nothing more than an idealisation of the past to hold this as a truism. And it would be problematic, at the very least, to assume either view as the correct interpretation of history. It would be left to the imagination of the agents to assume an authentic or pure Islam as found in a particular place and time. The point I make is that the bases of such assumptions arise from limited views of Islamic history, and are made possible in view of those Muslims who pinpoint moments in history as absolutely representative of its entirety. For example, either one finds an authentic Islam during the height of Muslim cultural accomplishment or a puristic version of Islam and holds it as the ideal.

I make the case of the fundamentalist and civilisational because of the ability of each mode to persist as dominant strains of interpretation through Islamic history. It is through this frame of reference that I proceed to analyse a nuanced discourse on the puritanical and urbane sensibilities within Islam. Here I detect two independent movements through time that either operate with recourse to an ideal past

or move beyond it. That is, those that seek to hold on to, and those who move beyond, the fundamentals of religion. The fundamentalist trajectory is underpinned by an obsession to preserve, revive, or instil what is held to be the 'pure' Islam of the seventh century, hence my associated use of 'puritanical'. The civilisational trajectory is underpinned by growth, development, and change. Differentiations made between 'literalist' and 'contextualist', though to some degree useful, are not necessarily relevant to my analysis. This is because agents of Islamic history are always engaged in interpretation, whether their own or someone else's. This is to signal an active ingredient of Islamic political thought: *ijtihad* (interpretation). Contrary to the claim that the 'gates' of *ijtihad* were closed, the reality is that it continues to be the primary leverage of each faction (whether Sunni or Shi'a) as justified according their respective traditions. In Sunni Islam, *ijtihad* is generally replaced in favour of *taqlid* (following tradition), but this in itself is based on *following* an interpretation as presented by a *mujtahid* (someone who can offer interpretation). Among the Shi'a, *ijtihad* is limited to the province of the elders or the elite group of clerics (ayatollahs) that are deemed to have the qualification to dispense with interpretation.

Sufism, too, is an embodiment of an interpretation of Islamic history. Found in its own variety of expression, it can be representative of either a more fundamentalist or civilisational nature. This presents its own set of complications in defining Sufism and, as such, it problematises the study of Sufism to be explored in this book.

Sufi orders

It is difficult to say with any certainty how many Sufi orders are presently active across the globe. Sufi orders are, today, mostly global entities connected by local and international networks of Sufi centres. However, there is a limited number of traditional historic orders that have been identified, and about most of which there is only cursory knowledge. Sufi orders generally consist of main branches that are partitioned into multiple sub-branches, without any consistent association or connection. The total number of Sufis belonging to these groups, or even the 'Sufi fold' more generally, is unknown simply because this information is unavailable to the public or academics. Furthermore, it would be impossible to collect such information because Sufism is, by virtue of its practice, esoteric.

Studies that have been conducted on Sufi orders, however, suggest Sufis are demonstrating significant signs of adaptation and innovation to local and global trends or behaviours (Malik and Hinnells, 2006; Milani and Possamai, 2013; Genn, 2007, 2013; Howell and van Bruinessen, 2007). For example, there are (sometimes subtle) indications of the orders engaging with secularisation processes on a number of levels (in practice) as opposed to resisting it (in theory). Some of these orders present themselves as being modern, displaying a consumerist ethic (being entrepreneurial or business oriented), and in almost all cases, including the more traditional orders, expanding online activity. In principle, the presence of Islam is historically felt in the form of a polity and so it comes as no

surprise, when studying the activities of Sufi organisations in their appropriate religious (i.e., Islamic) context, for Sufi orders to demonstrate high levels of social engagement. As such, the institutional savvy of the Sufi orders is not altogether a coincidence of modern sensibility and western temporality; rather, it is consistent with Islamic temperament in the goal of a sacralisation of the secular process begun by Muhammad once he became the prophetic sovereign of Medina. The political activity of the Sufi orders is an extension of the same modality of Islamisation as a sacralisation process. When and where possible, Sufi orders have become politicised and, as a result, the history of the orders is interwoven with degrees of political activity. Records of Sufi activity show variety in occupation to buttress, subvert, or create new regimes.

Whilst I appreciate the study of contemporary Sufism is not limited to engagement with only the traditional or conventional manifestations of Sufism, research should be expanded to include the widest possible variety of 'Sufisms' that one can encounter. However, in this work I am leaving aside the category of 'neo-Sufism', notwithstanding a minor caveat, and dealing more directly with Sufism proper, the proviso being that, understandably, Sufism entails a variety of expressions as per its usage among groups that utilise the historic label. Admittedly, whilst the term is thrown about lightly, in some instances of orders that have no apparent historical connection nor are cognate in an intelligible way (e.g., Sufism Reoriented), it is important to bear in mind that Sufism has been, for the longest time, in dialogue with non-Muslim elements, both cultural and religious, and within and beyond *dar al-Islam*.[1]

The case studies presented in this book are drawn from selected Sufi orders with traditional roots, all of which have fully attuned contemporary sensibilities. Interestingly, and this is exactly what represents the panorama of what Sufism can entail, one of the orders discussed in this book is a noted form of ancestral Sufism, but one which self-identifies as non-Islamic. The paradox is that while its disconnection with what it considers 'Islam' defines it, it does not escape the atmosphere of what is undoubtedly mystical Islam. Even though the ideology of this group, the Nimatullahi Khaniqahi, is a positive display of Persian indigeneity (cf., Milani, 2014) and thereby a good example of Sufi reinvention of tradition, it is nonetheless a Sufi order steeped in Iranian Islam. To be sure, the study of Sufism is a tradition that is protractedly nuanced and definitionally complex.

In conceptualising Sufism, it is firmly situated within the framework of the Islamic tradition and history. Beyond this outline, it is difficult to speak about 'Sufism' per se, venturing instead into the materialisation of the 'Islamic new age' if one might be daring enough to even contemplate the notion. Even with a restricted framework for analysis, the study of Sufism presents multiple challenges related to, for example, historiography, etymology, and cultural anthropology. In my approach, I prefer a composite representation of Sufism to a unilateral interpretation. Such restrictions permit for independent assessments of Sufism as historical, contemporary, and new-age developments without losing sight of Sufism as rooted in the Islamic, however narrowly or broadly defined.

It is paramount to place Sufism in full view of a multi-layered history of Islam. Interpretations of the past are usually limited by the collective understanding made available through group memory. When speaking about the Muslim community, any interpretation of the past must be initially subjected to the two emerging schisms that emerged during the first three centuries of Islamic history: the Sunni and Shi'a. Apropos, the Sufi tradition can be considered as presenting a third way of seeing the past through its own unique lens, and which tends to suggest that other sub-sects and divisions may hold a key to subaltern views of the past (Milani, 2014). Islamic history, therefore, comes to light in this manner as a mosaic representing a composite whole.

The task of speaking about Sufi orders is to explain what they represent in the bigger scheme of history. The advent of Islam in history is the unfolding of the faith in the absence of the Prophet. This is why the emphasis is placed on Muslims as being the substance of historical Islam. It is they who embody their religion according to their own understanding. And this understanding is varied and multifaceted. Sufi orders fit into this grand mosaic through their own interpretation of what Muhammad taught and how Revelation is to be understood.

Specific to the geographical focus of this study is the Asian continent, wherein each of the major Sufi orders discussed in this book originate. In fact, there are a total of eight original, and initial, Sufi orders that emerge in the Asian continent as influential institutions during the medieval period (see Table 2.1, Chronology of Sufi orders). Taking up a geographical rather than a geo-political designation, I locate the earliest manifestations of Sufism as germane to western Asia and South Asia primarily, and then extending to Central Asia and Asia Minor and beyond. It is then as a result of the Islamisation of greater Asia (Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Asia Minor, China), North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa during the early periods of Islamic history that the Sufis, and later the Sufi orders, play a major role in conversion to Islam. The initial activity of the historical Sufi orders was twofold: direct and indirect (or assertive and passive) political activity. In the form of indirect activity, the orders perpetuated an experiential Islam, both diffused throughout the region and infused with local, popular, and emotive cultural insights. As a direct force, some orders physically engaged in military battles against Christendom.

The Sufis and Sufi orders were active agents of Islamisation. Given that historical Islam or the manifestation of Islam is the establishment of polity, Sufis and Sufi orders are, in this sense, participants in Islamic politics. The qualification of their involvement depends upon the method and approach of these persons or organisations. The terms 'engaged' and 'disengaged' are used as a reference to the manner of approach to politics and not absenteeism; similarly, 'direct' (assertive) and 'indirect' (passive) refer to the method of political activity, and not inactivity and apathy on their part. Sufism is firmly located within the quintessentially Islamic activity of extending and expanding the influence of Islam. This is evidenced by the historical activity of the orders, which through medieval to modern times actively pursued the interests of 'Islamdom' in the establishment of assemblies, circles, learning centres, gathering houses, and monasteries

Table 2.1 Chronology of Sufi orders (proper)

Orders	*Approx. dating*	*Associated founder*	*Source region*	*Founder's locale*	*Politicised / patronised*
Chisti	10C	Abu Ishaq Shami ("the Syrian"), (d. 940) / Moinuddin Chishti (1141–1236) – Chishti introduced and established the Chishti Order of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent	South Asia/ Indian subcontinent	Herat, Afghanistan (migrated from Syria)	Patronised
Qadiri	12C	Abdul-Qadir Gilani (1078–1166)	West Asia / Baghdad	Gilan, Iran	Politicised
Suhrawardi	12C	Diya al-din Abu Najib al-Suhrawardi (1097–1168 CE) The founder's nephew is the famous Shahab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar Suhrawardi (1145–1234) who is responsible for the formalisation and spread to Baghdad and beyond	West Asia / Asia Minor	Kurdistan / Baghdad	Politicised
Kubrawi	13C	Nadjm ed-Din Kubra (1145–1221)	Central Asia (old Bukhara)	Khwarezm / modern-day Uzbekistan	Patronised
Bektashi	13C	Haji Bektash Veli (1209–1279)	Asia Minor (Anatolia)	Khurasan (Migrant from Nishapur)	Politicised
Mevlevi	14C	Sultan Walad (1226–1312) (one of the founders of the Mevlevi) Eldest son of Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273)	Asia Minor (Anatolia)	Konya, Anatolia (Rumi, migrant from Nishapur)	Politicised
Naqshbandi	14C	Baha-ud-Din Naqshband (1318–1389)	Central Asia (old Bukhara)	Modern-day Uzbekistan	Politicised
Nimatullahi	14C	Shah Nimatullah Wali (1330–1431)	West Asia	Kerman, Iran (Aleppo, Syria)	Patronised

Table 2.2 Geographical summary of point of origin of the Sufi orders, Asian continent (Asia)

Region	*Country*	*City*
Central Asia	Uzbekistan (Khwarezm)	Bukhara
West Asia	Iran, Iraq, Syria	Khurasan, Nishapur, Kerman, Gilan, Baghdad, Aleppo
South Asia	Afghanistan	Heart
Asia Minor	Turkey (Anatolia)	Konya

Table 2.3 Terminology for Sufi institutions

Term	*Usage*	*Origin*
Dargah	Shrine of a saint	Persian
Khaneqah/ribat	Sufi gathering house	Persian
Zawiya	Assembly, circle; also, can be religious school or monastery	Maghrebi/Northwest African

(known in different regions as *zawiya*, *khaniqah*, *ribat*) in key regions and along trade routes, as well as the building of countless shrines (*dargah*) devoted to sanctified Sufi personalities (both real and legendary), a site of constant visitation and homage for the masses. Sufis and Sufi orders can be quietist, but are never apolitical.

In the Table 2.1, I note those Sufi orders that were either politicised or patronised in the time period. My use of the word 'patronised' indicates those orders that were in receipt of patronage or support via political backing, but not directly involved in overt political activity. 'Politicised' I reserve for those orders that were overtly political and actively engaged. In general, Sufi activity is 'Islamic' and therefore political, as defined by their own hermeneutic and epistemology. Even where some represent themselves as being apolitical, their level of engagement in politics is measured not by apparent inactivity and overt apathy toward that subject matter, but rather by virtue of whether they are assertive or passive in their involvement. Therefore, appearing to be politically disengaged, in the Islamic setting, does not necessarily negate the possibility of covert involvement. Furthermore, the Sufi politics in a contemporary setting (as also to some degree in the medieval setting) have always included ruptures between the Sufi orders and the (Islamic/secular) political regime. Case studies on this can be readily found concerning Sufism in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Turkey. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, where a strong presence of political Islam or Islamist ideology has developed since 1979, Sufis and Sufi orders are not as integrated or socially and politically diffused as they are in, say, Indonesia, though Sufism is culturally fully diffused in a place such as Iran.

Spiritual piety and the plurality of experience

Sufism does not readily lend itself to easy interpretation. There are numerous groups and orders (*tariqah*) that represent the plurality of thought extant in the Islamic tradition and, in particular, as manifest throughout the Asian continent. The diversity of the traditions and customs that can be associated with Sufi groups and orders today is also of interest in examining the truly wide-ranging spectrum of Islamic social and political thought. Fascinatingly, Sufism from the ninth century onward is increasingly a tradition that baptises the pagan rituals, customs, and traditions of the pre-Islamic era and brings them into the domain of Islam, making them Islamic. There are examples of cultural and ideological appropriation throughout all of Asia, from the more subtle as noted in Iran (Central and West Asia) to the more apparent in Indonesia. The mystical tradition of Islam, therefore, is testament to one of the most successful examples of Muslim 'missionary' activity. Sufism as a historical force of Islamisation is somewhat inaccurately dubbed as a force of mediation between the Muslim and non-Muslim, but more aptly should be seen as a passive and indirect 'evangelising' of Islam. Yet Sufism does serve as a bridge between foreign ideas, its cultural elements, and those perceived as fundamental to Islam. What is perhaps more acutely symptomatic of the Sufi contribution to Islamic history is what it does as a force within Islam, expanding not only the realm of Islam through religious conversion, but also enriching its understanding of what it is to be Muslim, and what it means to conceive of the Islamic. The quantitative and qualitative role of Sufism has been paramount to the perpetuation of experiential Islam. To this effect, the Sufi tradition is in fact representative of a heterogeneous culture of rich diversity and a complex network of social layering and communal groupings. Sufism, then, was from the beginning an emerging trend within the Islamic faith that answers the challenge of addressing particular problems pertaining to cultural, social, and political inequalities. It is for this reason that Sufism today is quite often looked to for appeasing Islamic extremism and fundamentalism, and, indeed, in moderating the Muslim world throughout Asia and that of the West.

Of course, Sufi figures were generally learned members of the Muslim community in addition to being particularly well-travelled and familiar with other cultures outside of Islam. The Sufis have thus contributed widely to cultural production, for example, in art, music, dance, as well as ideas about sexuality expressed in literature, philosophy, and other pursuits that push or question the boundaries of normative Islam and the strict views of Islamic orthopraxy. However, with this in mind, there is a way in which Sufism also conversely acts to preserve 'the Islamic', and the core of Islamic identity and teaching by allowing an often-generous degree of flexibility and openness to the 'other'. In this way, I argue that Sufism can be seen quite rightly, and somewhat paradoxically, as a true champion of Islamic ideals. There is, indeed, a strong tradition of thinkers who have emerged from a Sufi education to defend Islam by way of better understanding the 'other'. The Sufis were not only knowledgeable about the Islamic faith, but also particularly interested in, and increasingly becoming familiar with, foreign

religious ideas and cultures. Given the interest in the Sufi as peaceful mediator between Islam and other religions – or, indeed, between geographical regions and cultures throughout contemporary Asia – I want to highlight that the social and political activity of Sufism has additionally served to reinterpret and bolster the Islamic position (internally) in the face of ideological challenges from the outside. What this book attempts to convey is a greater awareness of the two aspects of Sufism (i.e., as both simultaneously moderating and enforcing Islamic ideals).

Thinking historically and sociologically: the limitations of methodological scope

The late Shahab Ahmed (1966–2015), in his posthumous tome *What is Islam: the importance of being Islamic* (2016, p. 6), sought to:

> […] forward a conceptualisation of Islam as theoretical object and analytical category that maps meaningfully onto Islam as a human and historical phenomenon – a human and historical phenomenon characterised and constituted, not merely by immense variety and diversity, but by the prodigious presence of outright contradiction.

This is his way of asserting the importance of Islamic cosmopolitanism. That is, an Islam that is not defined by homogeneity, but by difference. Variation, complexity, and difference is what by necessity defines the reality of "being Islamic" according to Ahmed.

> This book was provoked by the sense that the existing conceptualisations of Islam – whether as religion, as culture, as civilisation, as discursive tradition, as core beliefs, as whatever-Muslims-say-it-is, as a law-centred phenomenon, as so plural and various as to be "islams-not-Islam", *etcetera* – have in various ways failed to convey the fullness of the reality of what it is that has actually been (and is) going on in historical societies of Muslims living *as Muslims*.
>
> (Ahmed, 2016, p. 542)

Ahmed provides a general theory that proposes to resolve contested understandings of Islam and Islamic scholarship. The challenge he identified is to provide a meaningful conceptualisation of 'Islam' as a theoretical object and analytical category which must "come to terms with – indeed, be coherent with – the capaciousness, complexity, and often, outright contradiction that obtains within the historical phenomenon" unfolding from the "human engagement with the idea and reality of Divine Communication to Muhammad, the Messenger of God" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 6). The problem, as Ahmed identifies, is not the "sheer diversity of – that is, range of differences between – those societies, persons, ideas and practices that identify themselves with 'Islam'", but instead a shortfall in

scholarship to reconcile seeming incongruence. The key to Ahmed's methodology is in his emphasis on "the importance of being Islamic". In this sense, 'Islamic' operates as the category within which all forms of interpretation and engagement with 'Islam' are located as each being a product of independent, yet relational, hermeneutics and epistemology. The activity of engaging with, and interpreting, Revelation provides for variance within Islam that may be contradictory or at times revolutionary, but nevertheless does not depart from Islam. In this way, Ahmed argues that working with Islamic data sets provides a method for "cohering meaningfully with the object Islam", and thereby conceptualising Islam "not by elimination of difference, but by inclusion of difference" (Ahmed, 2016, p. 542). In other words, there is not a version of Islam that prevails over others, but rather all are recognised justifiably as *being Islamic*.

Indeed, Ahmed provides an important avenue for thinking about Sufism outside of the normative scope of assessment. To apply his thesis, Sufism is part of a way of being Islamic. It is not an alternate form of Islam, nor is it separated from it. It is Islam(ic) and therefore contributes nothing to it other than to perpetuate the experience of Revelation. Ahmed's conceptualisation of Islam, furthermore, invokes probing into the limitations of discipline-specific studies of Sufism. I argue that his work is a significant trigger for a 'thinking outside the box' approach to disciplinary approaches. In taking up this challenge, this book is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary in nature. It aims to offer a method of thinking through the subject of Sufism whilst respecting the gravity of its assessment by the noted disciplines. This book is composed as a collection of essays that independently treat various aspects of the political elements in Sufism. They treat the subject by using the historical and sociological disciplines placed within the studies in religion framework. Together, the essays demonstrate the subtle process of the politicisation of Sufism.

There are a number of important recent works on the subject of Sufism that look to contextualise it within society and politics, all of which represent significant contributions to the growing field of knowledge in the area (e.g., Knysh, 2010; Malik and Hinnells, 2006; Curry and Ohlander, 2012; Green, 2012). I see my own work as contributing to this rapidly growing interest in Sufism and politics. I aim to provide not only a socio-historical analysis of Sufism, but also a religio-political examination. This will take into account important social and historical factors, not only for the contextualisation of Sufis and Sufi groups, but also for understanding Sufi political thought as an experienced reality. I will do this primarily by reference to the advent of Sufism in Iran. This is a niche area of interest that has been little explored in the context of Sufism, society, and politics. Iranian Sufism is also an important political pressure point in the history of Islam.

The contribution of Iranians to Islam cannot be understated, which, by analogy, is akin to the contribution of the Greeks to Orthodoxy.[2] This is not the same thing as saying that Iranians have changed Islam into something Persian; rather, as per the analogy of the Greek role in Orthodoxy, Iranian Muslim intellectuals, like the Greek Fathers, were foremost committed to their faith tradition which they sought to refine and develop through methods of understanding. The process

was implicitly about knowing, interpreting, and explaining their religion, through *tafsir* works (such as commentaries on the Qur'an) for instance. In this manner, we can speak of the Iranian contribution. There is another sense in which cultural identity and religion can be referred to, and this is by virtue of inferring such a phenomenon as 'Greek Orthodox' and 'Iranian Islam' as indicating cultural ownership of the tradition. By this I mean to assert that over time religions are adapted on a cultural level to facilitate regional understanding of what it means to be of that faith. And, as such, peculiarities of a nuanced appreciation of religion among ancient civilisations, such as Greek and Persian, are brought to bear. Iranians have helped structure the cornerstone of Islamic legal, theological, intellectual traditions. Yet, the long tradition of Sufism that has prevailed in Iran (or greater Iran, previously including political centres of Central and South Asia) has also contributed to the shaping of that society. The Sufis of Iran, in particular, have played a considerable role in generating a grand poetic genre, accompanied by music, dance, and wine drinking, which are all captured through an archaic Persian symbolic language. The Sufi contribution of cultural revelry will, therefore, differ from the Iranian contribution to the Islamic sciences. I have discussed the Iranian Sufi and its composite Persian cultural influence elsewhere (Milani, 2014). I will, in later chapters, provide a probing of the ideas encountered through the Iranian focus and the way that these particularly relate to their specific social and political climate of the Muslim world. This book also takes a particular interest in the fortunes of the Iranian diaspora and Sufi culture that has emerged outside of Iran and in a western context, but doing so reflexively – looking to the roots of Sufism in Asia and how these have informed the social and political framework of its activity elsewhere. My engagement with the subject matter is, in many ways, an exercise in examining the intellectual character of Sufism as well as its historical traits, both broadly speaking as well as pertaining to the contribution of Iranian Sufism specifically. The book aims to contextualise the activity of Sufism not only in a narrowly focused socio-historical framework, but, additionally, it is hoped that its readership would also be willing to be engaged in the activity of thinking about the social and political thought processes involved, and the ramifications that affect the broader global landscape about religious identity and power relations.

I invite the reader to reflect on the possibilities that Sufism opens up for the study of Islam. It is not merely a question of Sufi history or the sociology of Sufism, but rather making the connection, as did Michel Foucault (1996, p. 411) in his uncompromising statement:

> The game is to try to detect those things which have not yet been talked about, those things that, at the present time, introduce, show, give some more or less vague indications of the fragility of our system of thought, in our way of reflecting, in our practices.

The assertion is that the domain of analysis does not stem from discipline but rather from its cross-pollination. This is not dissimilar to the force of Turnerian

sociology. Turner's sociology of Islam is a necessary point of reference, not only because of its nuanced approach, but also for its comprehensive understanding of Islam as a lived experience. He provides a practical framework of analysis with which to treat the study of Islam as situated in the wider context of scholarly enquiry. His sociology is informed by what he terms as "classicality", an exposition on "a tradition of sociology that is concerned with the analysis of the social structure, with modernity and with the construction of generic theories of society". This, he argues, is "an evolving and not static tradition", and for which he saw Bourdieu as a foremost representative (Turner, 2013, p. 17). Turner's linking of Weber's lexicon with Bourdieu's, in the context of "classicality", is a welcomed corrective to the "methodological provincialism" prevalent in Islamic studies scholarship (Turner, 2013, p. 19). Turner advances a sophisticated methodological tool that cuts through the mélange of scholarship driven by ideology and politics as well as those that place stress on studies of Islam by those from inside the faith. Furthermore, Turnerian sociology sidesteps the limitations and pitfalls of empirical rigidity and narrow causality in raising broader questions about historical and comparative research that remain apposite to the methodological approach of this study. Turner's interpretation of Weber's sociology "as an inquiry into personality and life-orders" forms a tested comparative historical sociology of religion capable of accurately assessing "how different social and cultural environments facilitated the rise of what we might call 'personality types' and their relationships to economics and politics" (Turner, 2013, p. 16). This approach is critical in not only locating, but also defining, Sufi agency in relation to politics within the Islamic context. Moreover, Turner's comparative lexiconic analysis between Weber and Bourdieu is of relevance to the Sufic paradigm, since Bourdieu's vocabulary not only enriches the Weberian, but also gives scope to another area of interest in this work on the politics of religion and the body. The Sufi might be considered as the point where "the body is the site of incorporated history" (Thompson, 2008, p. 13; see also Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 437, 466–468). As discussed in the final chapter, the politics of the body, even of experience of the religious, are not to be underestimated within the social structure as confined to power relation between forces, but also as a bodily experience (hexis) defined by such forces.

I find Turner's approach in accord with my own concerns about limitations of discipline. From a studies-in-religion perspective, I too am concerned with questions of ideological interpretations of the foundations of religion, and the empirical and historical problem that it presents. By extension, as I concede the importance of looking at religious origins as normative criteria, I assess them here as part of the problematic of empirical facts. Turner's interventions into the sociology of Islam, and the academic study of Islam more broadly, serve the historian of religion not bound by the strictures of empiricism, but rather as encompassing the treatment of "charisma, social carriers and social classes" *à la* Weber in relation to the study of religion.

To understand the charisma of Sufism, its role as a social carrier, and its diffusion into all levels of social class, is to recognise its variance, though not divergence, from Islam. Indeed, the activity of Sufism in the political field is defined by

its motivation to propagate Islam with the intention of expanding the geo-political arena of the Islamic domain and also to preserve and bolster the Islamic within its own. Sufism as the 'wild-card' in Islamic religio-political expansion is historically and phenomenologically demarcated by the quality to absorb into itself what is not Islam and make it Islamic.

Notes

1 On the subject, refer to Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism* (2017).
2 Of the Greek, the well-known influence of the Cappadocian Fathers, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor, can be noted with regards Orthodoxy Christianity. Counted among the Persian contributors, consider the revered collators of Prophetic accounts: Bukhari and Muslim; the renowned chronicler al-Tabari; the eminent theologian al-Ghazali; and the philosopher Avicenna, to name but a few.

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3 Following the conceptual thread

Sufism as an experience of Asia[1]

It may not have gone unnoticed, but it is certainly worth reminding, that the terms 'Sufi' and 'Sufism' – indicating the tradition of mysticism that is derived from 'wool' (and by extension those who wore coarse woollen garbs to show their piety and renunciation) – are not etymologically cognate with *tasawwuf* and *mutasawwif*, which literally translate as 'mysticism' and 'mystic'. This is a tell in not only reconstructing the early history of the Sufi tradition as being borne out of an earlier movement of Muslim warrior ascetics (*zuhhad*) and frontiersmen, but also a considerably vital point evidencing the early history of Sufism as having unmistakable Christian associations. Furthermore, of note is the fact that neither do 'Islam' or 'Muslim' (meaning the act of absolute submission to, and being defined as the subject of Allah) have etymological affiliation with *mu'min* and *mu'minun*, which translates as 'believer(s)', but which are all used interchangeably in the Qur'an in reference to the adherents of the Prophet. I mention this because neither the history of Islam nor that of Sufism, which is inclusive of Islamic history, can be properly explained without reference to Christianity, Christendom, and Christian history. It is, after all, through direct contact with both Christians and Christendom that Islam becomes increasingly reified as a religious tradition in its own right. I will return to this point – in particular, that of Christian–Muslim relations – in the later chapters. In this chapter I will follow the conceptual thread in Sufi scholarship and lay down the framework for examining Sufi political activity in the appropriate geo-political and cultural context.

Discursive tools

Sufism is a widely studied phenomenon about which numerous scholars have written from a variety of perspectives, and researchers have also investigated its appearance and activity across the globe. There is hitherto no agreed upon and definitive explanation of 'Sufism' or 'Islamic mysticism' (*tasawwuf*), and experts disagree about its exact role in the history of Islam. But there is an important lesson found in the observation of such a variety of research outcomes: 'Sufism', not just in the academic setting, is a category similar to 'Islam', 'religion', 'fundamentalism', 'modernity', and so on, which hints not at an essentialism about the phenomenon,

but rather brings to light the effect of its conceptualisation for all. Alexander Knysh writes:

> All these and many other conceptions often mean different things to different people and their usage varies considerably depending on the context in which they are deployed. If we still insist on having a universally acceptable definition of Sufism, we'll have to concede that it is yet to be developed and agreed upon by western scholars. Does this imply that we should simply discard the notion of "Sufism" [...]? Interestingly, this is exactly what many Sufi masters of old encouraged their followers to do, citing the ineffability and uniqueness of mystical experience and its distinctness from one mystic to another.
>
> (2005, p. 107)

The point is to work with terminology such as 'Sufism' as a theoretical object and analytical category, and not as representative of a singular ontological reality. Knysh's point is that it demonstrates even the so-called 'Sufis' were aware of the limitations of nomenclature. Admittedly, terminology is not the only point of contention, but rather and more commonly the utilisation of the academic study of Sufism by scholars of Islamic studies. As an extension to his critique of the current state of Islamic studies becoming increasingly theological, apologetic, and essentialist, Aaron Hughes (2007, p. 31) explains that the rise in interest in Sufi studies is similarly troubled by a less than critical research focus geared towards remedying Islamophobia. The danger is that Sufism more often serves in research as a medium for peaceful negotiation and a reminder that Islam is at its heart a religion of peace and love, whilst ignoring that Sufis and Sufi orders have historically been agents of social mobilisation and political intervention. In this, Knysh as well as Hughes address the concern with scholarship that is coloured by the disciplinary focus of the researcher (Hughes, 2012, p. 21; 2007, p. 31).

The answer to the question 'what is Sufism?' is categorically an outcome of a) which Sufi figure or Sufi group occupies the focus of research and b) the extent to which the research data is influenced by the disciplinary focus. It is no surprise, then, that the sum total of the literature on the study of Sufism is a constellation of studies on figures and groups of Islamic history. The bulk of this literature is concerned with the definition and role of Sufism, but sociological and historiographical projects – giving attention to place, processes, and routines of the everyday – have furnished scholarship with a more encompassing view of both historic and contemporary Sufism (cf., Knysh, 2010; Curry and Ohlander, 2012). There is another relational line of query that has mostly fallen to the background of recent scholarly endeavours – that of origin. Can Sufism be conceived of as an autochthonous tradition? This question of indigeneity, at least to some extent, correlates with the bigger question of origins, and thus the key point of early scholarly preoccupation with Sufism.

Of direct concern to the question of Iranian indigenous elements is the theory that was advanced by Robert Charles Zaehner (1913–1974). Zaehner raised the issue that Sufi teachings appear to be in contradiction to Islamic orthopraxy. It would

thus be perceived that a 'heretical' Sufism was opposed by an 'orthodox' Islam. While such dichotomising is admittedly problematic, Zaehner's efforts are not to be ignored in their entirety. Certain identifiable Sufi characteristics do suggest a foreign element that Zaehner argued was derived from a "Hinduist" persuasion (Zaehner, [1960] 1994, pp. 3, 108–109). Critics of Zaehner argued that the Qur'an and Sunna were sufficient sources of influence for all that Muslim mystics said and did. If this is so, and if the view about Sufism as having an independent trajectory is not entirely discarded, then the argument can be made that the Qur'an and Sunna, as subjects of academic scrutiny, are themselves obviously not immune from foreign influence.

Henry Corbin (1903–1978) is the foremost exponent of the Iranian origin of Sufism. Corbin wanted to prove the affinity between Shi'ism and Sufism. He concluded that Sufism was, early on, imbued with Shi'a esoteric ideas, and that the development of its tradition was particularly indebted to the Persians involved in bringing the intellectual culture into realisation. Two points of clarification are necessary here in order to avoid misconceptions of Corbin's thesis. First, he held that the inhabitants of Iran and the Persian-speaking parts of the Muslim world were at the height of intellectual and spiritual life. Second, he underlined the effect of early Shi'ism prior to its later stagnation and institutionalisation (Corbin, 1971–1972, [1964] 1993). The difficulty with Corbin's view is that it tends to portray Sufism as essentially 'Iranian'. This leads to a later Irano-centric focus in the works of Iranian intellectuals, and ultimately ignores or sidelines critical and contemporaneous developments outside of Iran. Corbin's contribution is no doubt important, and the basic thread of his thesis, which suggests Sufism gained a level of maturity and developed a greater capacity for literary and intellectual expression among the Persians, is certainly defensible.

The idea of an 'authentic Islam' or 'authentic Sufism' as opposed to 'unauthentic Islam/Sufism' is to be strictly avoided. To adapt Marshall Hodgson's (1974) critique of the 'Arabocentric' perspective, and following Knysh's own but analogous suggestions, neither Sufism nor Islam (or the textual productions ascribed to them) should be treated as a fixed and final entity. Both are open to change and fluctuations and have produced variations in both their manifestation and advocacy. Hughes follows a similar line of critique of Islamic scholarship that attempts to produce a 'normative' or 'genuine' form of Islam or Sufism and label those non-Islamic and non-Sufi elements as 'foreign importations' and 'borrowings'. Such an approach is not only static and a-historical, but it also treats this alleged 'genuine' form (i.e., Islam or Sufism) "as a self-sufficient and unchangeable entity, a 'thing in itself' that was somehow immune from re-interpretations and re-assessment by its adherents, who came from a wide variety of educational, ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds" (Knysh, 2005, p. 125).

The Sufi heritage of Iran is a well-studied field that demonstrates the power of Sufi cultural capital to influence change and shape the religio-political climate.[2] Previously, I have drawn on these studies to explain the often overlooked or difficult-to-perceive drive behind Sufi literature as evidence of political contestation within the Iranian social framework, and as an expression of the particularities of Iranian indigeneity. This chapter will further detail the correlations between Sufi

cultural capital and Iranian indigeneity, though not as a means to promote a Persian influence on Sufism, but rather to underline the Persianate, and thereby expose the centrality of West Asian contributions to the evolution of Sufism. Also worth noting is that the motivation of this chapter is not a search for the origins of Sufism, nor an attempt to determine Persia as the foundation hub of Sufism. What this chapter does is note the effect of greater Iran during the development of the mystical tradition of Muslims in regions coloured by the 'Persianate'. Still, the intellectual contribution of second and third generations of Iranian converts to the new religion (Islam) should be of particular note. Among them are some of the most renowned figures of Islamic theology and tradition (*sunna*): Bukhari, Muslim, and al-Ghazali (d. 1111). Iranian Muslims were not only significant for the development of Shi'i gnoseological tradition (*irfan*), as history typically remembers them, but also for their earlier and foundational contribution to Sunni rationalism and the inauguration of educational institutions. Iran was, after all, Sunni until the time of Safavid power, and classical Sufism is predominantly a Sunni affair.

In this light, Iran, as a formative force in south and western reaches of Asia, has been vital in the formation of Islamic culture. As argued by Richard Bulliet, less attention is paid to the fact that the Abbasid period signals the beginning of a uniquely Iranian (Muslim) dynasty that follows the decline of the Arab in the Middle East (Bulliet, 1994, pp. 37–39). The case could be made that the Iranians played a significant role in transforming Islam into a global faith. Also noteworthy is the extent to which the later development and maturation of the tradition of Islamic mysticism owes to the Iranian social and cultural milieu, and, indeed, religious sensibility.

Historicity, historicism, and historicisation

There are, of course, problems in the way that one might conceive of the 'indigenous' in Iran, and especially when attempting to discern its influence on later developments. Also, there is the problematic nature of locating and defining the 'autochthonous' element. A point to be appreciated, however, is that it is as difficult to pin down a definitive Iranian ethos as it is to outright ignore a consistency of 'Persianness' in the long history of the Iranians. To be sure, Iran stands out among its Semitic neighbours in the Middle East. It is geographically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously unique, so much so that it is seen as an anomaly. Whereas Iranians have always had a westward orientation, Iran has had a great deal more in common – culturally, linguistically, and religiously – with its eastern cousins. And, arguably, Iran has had far more influence on regions east of its borders. Iran has experienced great change over a long period of time. Both in its conquests, and being conquered, Iran displays an array of influences from the other. Some of these influences are more discernible than others, but notable are Assyrian, Mesopotamian, Arab, Turkic, and Mongol influences that are evident in the formation of what is considered 'Persian' or 'Iranian', and should not be discounted as being composite in the emergence of the identity of its people and its nation. But the Iranians are of a distinctive Aryan race of the Indo-European

stock of people. And despite social and cultural fluctuations throughout the years, the distinguishable Aryan identity remains intact – though arguably more as a political trope that is repeatedly revived for bolstering national fervour.

For this reason, I treat the 'indigenous' here as those relics of Iran's past that are clearly demarcated from the newly introduced 'Arab Islamic' component that comes to define the history of Iran from the seventh century. In relation to the indigenous elements within Sufism, what I refer to as 'autochthonous' is simply the carry-over of pre-Islamic components into the Islamic period, and I speak about these as indigenous Iranian elements because they are the relics of a bygone era that are somewhat revived and integrated into (and, to a large extent, have come to define) the Sufic culture among the Iranians. As such, I will tend to view the development of 'Persianness' or 'Iranianness' as dynamic and unidirectional, with each period of its history to be carefully defined in relation to its appropriate socio-historical context. By no means do I take Iran to be a monolithic whole, an entity that is defined by essential characteristics that can be clearly identified as intrinsically Persian or Iranian and that are seen to endure the ages.

The Islamification of Iran was the last major, albeit gradual though long-lasting, process of transformation for the Iranians. It was a transformation that they took in their stride, as they proceeded to don the 'tunic' of the Muslim entirely in their own style. Whilst the Arab Muslims for a long time ruled over a majoritively non-Muslim population outside of the Arabian Peninsula, the years of the Arab conquest of Persia (beginning in the 630s) are typically taken to demarcate a major historical shift and a commonly perceived break with the Iranian past.[3] There are in fact far more instances of continuity and appropriation than usually admitted by those who wish to exacerbate the chasm between 'Iranian' and 'Arab' or between the old Indo-Iranian religions and the newly dominant Semitic monotheisms. Nevertheless, the point made here is that this continuity is well documented and visible in the emergence and development of Islamic mysticism.

The development of Sufism in Iran serves as a case in point that helps demonstrate a significant correlation between the old and new, and the gradual transformation of the religion of the Arabs into a local, hybrid form of Islam unique to the Iranians. Sufism is, in many ways, one such product, born through the fusion of indigenous Iranian identity and belief systems, and the introduced Arab Islamic culture. Indeed, as problematic as it is to talk about Sufism itself as being a clearly defined and essentialised movement, it would be better explained – in the context of religious and cultural identity – that Sufism was just one element out of the many possible interpretations of Islam, and similarly one such experience, among many, that contributed to what it meant to be Muslim. Rather than speaking of a perpetual clash between 'Sufism' and 'Islam', or between 'pure jurists/theologians' and the 'heretical Sufis', it is more accurate to underline the differences of opinion, personalities, and vested economic interests and, of course, factional rivalries (Knysh, 1994, pp. 273–275).

The topological and categorical legacy of Iranian religious heritage raises questions about the factors involved in ensuring the longevity of ancient Persian religious culture, and thus how it has survived into modern times. Avoiding

essentialist and essentialising discourses, my aim here is to conceptualise the use of 'indigenous' within the scope of a study of Sufism in Iran, and more specifically Sufism in the historical imagination of Iranians. The latter is just as important, since it is the perception of later times as shaped by its reconstruction of the past that both outlines a peoples' desire to know the past and to inadvertently manufacture it. I will be expanding on what is seemingly the 'Persian religious consciousness' from pre-Islamic times to the Islamic era and how this, correctly understood, has contributed to the development of Sufism more broadly.

Persian religious consciousness

The use of 'Persian religious consciousness' is admittedly somewhat bold and contentious, given issues of theory and method raised; however, I would argue it is a necessary step in emphasising any explanation of why Iran is the anomaly that it is in the Middle East. This part has a great deal to do with geography, and, as a consequence, cultural and ideological distances between the political centre in Baghdad and the remote mercantile and agricultural oasis in Khurasan. In comparing two areas of the Abbasid empire, the western and eastern as it were, I am not making the assumption that there are two 'types' of Sufism in competition: one in Baghdad and the other in Khurasan. The emergence of Sufism is more accurately seen as a diffusion or circulation of ideas and practices of a religious nature with Khurasan offering its own unique contributions (Green, 2012, p. 44).

What is seen with developments in Khurasan – from the ninth to the twelfth century – relates directly to the discourse about the diffusion of indigenous elements of Iranian culture and the gradual emergence of Sufism during this process. The impact of geography is important here since the western parts of the Islamic Abbasid Empire were formerly under Byzantine Christian rule; Khurasan was, in contrast, subject to Persian Zoroastrian rule and also contained clusters of Buddhist and Christian presence. The conditions in Khurasan, therefore, set up a precedent that defined itself as Muslim in harmony with the local flavour, which shaped the notion of Islam as the religion of an immigrant imperial elite. These local developments are discussed in detail elsewhere, and were direct contributing factors to the production and definition of later Sufi ritual and practice (Green, 2012, p. 45, n. 65). This is not to say that the residents of Khurasan were less Islamic or pseudo-Muslim. Rather, being far removed from the imperial hothouse of religious production and disputation in Baghdad, it merely ensured that Islamic ideas were being sowed in a distinctive cultural soil that produced its own new kind of Muslim movements (Green, 2012, p. 45).

Thus, any notion of an unadulterated and pure Persian culture can certainly be attributed to the machinations of modern nationalism. Having said this, however, it is also a key point in the argument put forward here about indigeneity. The imaginary, whether ancient or modern, should not be neglected or discarded entirely from view. Its historical validity, according to Trompf, is first and foremost found in appreciating and doing the work in retracing the steps in a peoples' mythical re-construction of their own past (Trompf, 1989). Moreover, to draw

on Hughes (2012, e.g., p. 24), the value of myth-histories within the academic study of religion more generally suggests that such perceived notions, whether of the past or present, whilst invariably not true either in part or in their entirety, nevertheless say something important about those that are identified with the idea. Indeed, the deconstruction of myth-histories yields the dynamic and often difficult relationship between subject and historical enquiry and between data and knowledge formation.

Richard Bulliet's study of local histories in medieval Iran clearly outlines the way in which Islam is accepted and shaped through regional appropriations (Bulliet, 1994). His work is discussed in detail in chapter four, though it would suffice to point that Bulliet's work reveals that there are important local histories to be accounted for, which are typically overlooked in favour of historical narratives that align with the "view from the centre" (Bulliet, 1994, pp. 8f, 169f). The biographical dictionaries, which compile the source materials in Bulliet's research, are the basis for invaluable insight into the ordinary lives of everyday Muslims. The result is a narrative that expresses the view from the periphery of Islamic society. Bulliet's historiography deals directly with the development of local Islamic traditions based on an integration of 'indigenous' cultures of previously non-Arab, non-Muslim peoples with that of the foreign (and new) religion of the invading Arabs. The Iranian response, as presented in Bulliet's study, is an excellent demonstration of the activity of the 'indigenous' in asserting itself through the creation of a distinct identity. Furthermore, it clearly shows how the 'indigenous' element in different geographies had lent itself to variations in the development of Sufi ideas and practices in Spain in contrast to the East, generally (Bulliet, 1994, p. 170).

The work of retracing the steps of a specific Iranian myth-history, to apply Trompf, will no doubt raise uncomfortable concerns and confronting notions about identity construction, to say the least. Yet it is an exercise that is necessary (Jensen, 2005, p. 4) in the context of locating the notion of 'indigeneity' in the collective historical memory of 'autochthones' (Sanson, 1985), specifically in the case of Iranian Sufis, as we will come to see shortly in the case study of a contemporary Sufi order with special links (albeit, constructed) to an imagined, historic past.

My own view of approaching the categories of 'indigeneity' and 'indigenous religion' follows the road already mapped out by Lars Jensen in *Unsettling Australia* (2005). Widespread academic inquiries into the guarded 'national Establishment' and its cherished nationalist myth are not peculiar to any one time or place. Jensen's analysis of the Australian phenomenon has correlations with the Iranian phenomenon, and one that the case of Sufi indigeneity can just as easily slip into. The autochthone narrative is an important one to pay close attention to, though not at the expense of ignoring the colonialist discourse. Looking critically at both exposes what is in reality the "shifting theoretical ground" about establishment views on nationhood and its associated rhetoric (Weaver, 2000, p. 221). Any discussion of indigeneity will undoubtedly cut across notions about race, marginality, imperialism, and identity (Weaver, 2000, p. 221). And "the closer one cuts to the bone, the sharper the nationalist reaction […]" (Jensen, 2005, p. v).

Of course, specific studies that detail conversions of regional indigeneity and Islamic mysticism document the creation of myth and the invention of tradition peculiar to geo-social climates. For example, Sears (2000) discusses the blending of 'native' Javanese mysticism (*wayang*) with Islamic Sufi teachings within the context of postcolonial studies, highlighting the way in which both regional (Javanese) and external (European) representations participated in the construction of Javanese literary and historical traditions. The specialised research of Martin van Bruinessen (1998) furthermore outlines the role of grassroots Sufism as a form of religio-political resistance to European domination. With the continued persecution of Sufi orders in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East, this work follows the efforts of Lloyd Ridgeon (2010) and Leonard Lewisohn (2006), two prominent scholars of Sufism, in dealing directly with the historical roots of Sufism in Iran (as well as its extensions in diasporic communities), and tensions (whether perceived or otherwise) with normative Islam as prescribed by the authorities there.

The effect of the broader construction of indigeneity (Weaver, 2000) within Sufi history is well demonstrated in local manifestations of Sufic culture in Asia. The case studies drawn up on in this work help to demonstrate the cultural processes through which Sufism is established in the region, and then how it is reformulated in the later imagination of Sufi orders. The legacy of Javad Nurbakhsh, a contemporary Sufi master (1926–2008), is a good example of the indigenous category operating in Sufi thought. In the example of Nurbakhsh (which will be discussed later), traces of Persian Antiquity form part of a larger effort to co-opt the rhetorical capital of past encounters in order to confer special status to Sufism as being distinct from Islam. The product is a series of polemical narratives that aim to set certain Sufi traditions apart from others. He does this by utilising the rhetorical device of the indigenous category to demonstrate how his formulation of Sufism as being 'indigenous' to Iran is a phenomenon that is grounded in historical authority and lineage. This idea that Nurbakhsh has produced deliberately reaches back in time to show its specialness, and to carve out traditions that make Sufism unique. In doing so, he aims to define membership in the uniqueness of the category he has constructed. The category is deployed politically for religious reasons, and it is a category that becomes particularly acute in the post-revolution atmosphere of 1979, followed by his exile to the United Kingdom (Lewisohn, 2006, p. 51). The use of the category is, therefore, based on membership formation and it contrives to present a stark difference between being a member and not being a member of the constructed category. The case study of Nimatullahi Khaniqahi Sufism provides a process of categorising Sufism as indigenous in contradistinction to other forms of (non-Iranian) Sufism and in particular to Islam generally. This is facilitated by a dialectic between the categories of members and non-members or non-Islamics (Milani, 2014, p. 206f; 2016).

Sufi cultural capital

It is important to put into perspective the relationship between cultural (and subsequently) symbolic capital and that of power relations. These terms are borrowed

from Bourdieu's sociological vocabulary in the context of his theoretics, and I will return to discuss them in relation to the power dynamic of Sufism in society. For now, however, I would like to broadly employ the terms to set the wider framework for how Sufism was utilised within the Muslim political arena.

There is a conscious attempt on the part of mystically inclined Muslims to build a formidable repertoire of cultural capital. The motivation behind this is explained by the complex relations between social agents who compete for power within the political arena. A significant part of this setting is defined by the dynamics of the Irano–Arab relationship immediately following the conquest. As such, non-Arab converts to Islam are a solid example of how 'new' Muslims become key players in the history of Islam starting from the ninth and tenth centuries onward. Between 850 and 1050, Sufis, over a span of two centuries, were able to acquire their own measure of capital. Inhabitants of the West Asian region were drawn to the newly developing mystical Sufi-inspired 'Islam' from the ninth century onward, and it was they who were active in contributing their own 'native' innovations that, through Sufism, came to find its place within Islam. The Sufi contribution added to the overall richness and diversity of desired symbolic capital. The Sufi appropriation of chiefly native Persian themes was a way to upset the balance of power, whereby the conquered 'natives' ironically took control of the introduced religion.

In the formative years, a primary aim of Sufi activity within northeastern Iran (in the province of Khurasan for instance) would have been to establish the superiority of their own variation of the Sufi interpretation of the religion and elevate the so-called indigenous status above that of the 'other' through sheer mastery of the new faith. This process, therefore, can be defined by the way in which the Sufis of Iran, in particular, invested in the existing cultural and linguistic capital available to them in their aim of outclassing competing versions or interpretations of the introduced faith. The argument for the Sufi cultural capital is supported by the conversion of Iranians to Islam, which was a long and slow process over four hundred years. This supplants the two earlier theories about the conversion of Iran: the conquest by sword and Marxian economic persuasion, suggesting instead that Iranians gradually became familiar with the religion of their conquerors prior to converting.[4]

Cultural capital: fragments of Iranian indigeneity

Iranians gradually embraced the new faith, but this often had little to do with religion. It was less so that Iranians were motivated by the promise of the *Qur'an* as much as they were eager to make the religion of the Arabs their own. Here I want to provide a comparative analysis between symbolic artefacts from the cult of Mithra and the Sufi tradition in order to demonstrate real examples of appropriation. Sufficient archaeological evidence permits a basic (and cautionary) analysis, but, to be clear, I do not intend to make a case for a direct historical connection between Mithraism and Sufism. My intention is purely to demonstrate one of a number of indigenous denominators in the Sufism of Iran which echoes the nation's cultural past (Lewisohn, 2006, p. 56; Ansari, 2012).

Iran produced a rich repository of literary materials during the Islamic period. With the introduction of paper to the Muslim world from China, probably around the ninth century, the proliferation of written sources throughout major cities such as Baghdad or Nishapur has provided a unique but narrow window to Iran's historic past. Iranian poetry, in particular, in the form of the grand epic of Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, for example, provides a fascinating sample for examination of this kind (Ansari, 2012, p. 105). Known as the "Book of Kings [of Persia]", the text contains a mythical and historical account of Iran in accordance to the reign of fifty Persian kings. Firdausi belonged to the class of landowners of the old Iranian aristocracy. He was a patriot and a custodian of Iran's pristine cultural heritage and that of the memory of her kings. Firdausi immortalised the collected heroic saga in its final form in verse. In this exercise, literary sources such as the *Shahnameh* become noted 'archaeological' fields seen to contain notional and thematic artefacts rooted in a distant time (Foucault, 2002).[5] There is also a sufficient portion of art objects that though mostly produced in the Islamic era, reflect the style of the Persian Sasanid past. The combination of the two (Persian poetry and art objects) reveals important and recurrent patterns in Iranian thought from Antiquity through to the Islamic period. These materials speak to the thematic correspondence between long-term pre-Islamic and Islamic Persian symbolism.

I have argued elsewhere that the source of wine drinking and self-sacrifice symbolism – a prominent feature of Persian Sufi literature – is closely linked with sacrificial rites of the ancient pagan world of pre-Zoroastrian Iran (Milani, 2014, e.g., p. 61f). This correlation is found in the Neolithic Iranian cult of Mithra, in which the god is praised in the *Khorda Avesta* as "Mithra of wide cattle pastures" and whose ceremony was closely tied to the sacrifice of the bull. While this ritual is interrupted in Iran with the consolidation of Zoroaster's teaching against the practice of bull sacrifice, the imagery is later preserved in the Roman appropriation and depicted in the tauroctony scene, samples of which are found in temple remains across the Roman Empire. The tauroctony scene is one of the renowned cult reliefs attributed to the Mithraic mysteries that thrived in the Roman world. These reliefs usually depict the central mythology of the Iranian creation story as found in the *Bundahish*. At the core of Roman Mithraic mysteries is the figure of Mithras (the Roman cult's protagonist), donning a Phrygian hat and killing a bull. The killing of the bull symbolises the beginning of life, and the bull's blood is the life source. One obvious link between the Iranian creation story and Roman Mithraism is the blood that pours from the moribund victim in the tauroctony. In ancient Iran, Mithra was the god that sanctioned bonds through the ancient rite of the bull sacrifice (Hinnells, 1974, p. 248). In Mithraism, the ritual incorporates the blood of the sacrificial animal as part of a purification ceremony. The thematic continuity between the Iranian cult of Mithra and Roman Mithraism is certainly apparent, but the meaning of the sacrifice is defined in a new context. For ancient Iranians, Mithra was known as the god of justice, mediation, and contractual agreement. The ritual of bull sacrifice among ancient Iranians is connected to the treaties made between peoples and the event being sanctioned by a festivity that included a shared meal. Zoroaster's intervention seems to be connected to a religious reform

aimed at stabilising society along the lines of a new ethical guideline, in an effort to neutralise what was by then a failing system of his ancestors that had declined to in-fighting and cattle thievery. Still, particular elements of Mithraic practice continue to hold among western Iranians, which explains Roman appropriations.

The sentiments of this ancient ritual not only emigrated, but they also found alternate means of survival within Iran. There are numerous allusions to 'blood' in Persian Sufi literature through figurative language. The interpretation of the ritual sacrifice is talked about in relation to a symbolic representation of wine and personal transformation. A particular passage from the *Bundahishn* further consolidates the connection of wine with that of bull's blood: "It is said in the scripture: when the sole-created Gav passed away […] out of the blood grew the gourd of the wine grape from which they prepare wine […]" (Anklesaria, 1956, p. 53). A striking cognate feature shared by Mithraic and Sufic ritual symbolism is that the blood is symbolic of the life essence and the soul-rejuvenating elixir (Hinnells, 1974, p. 248). In the Iranian Sufi literature, it is the Sufi master who is the one who performs the sacrifice, slaughtering the ego of the neophyte. The theme of *pir-e moghan* or 'Magian master' and his connection with sacrificial bull's blood is thus later understood to supervise the symbolic 'wine drinking' for the Sufis; a double theme that is transmitted right throughout Persian Sufi poetry depicting the steps in the sacred passage of mystical initiation (Melikian-Chirvani, 1992, pp. 101–133). Of course, the peculiar presence of "wine drinking" and the "Magian Master" in Persian Sufi literature explains the metamorphosis of ancient rites and their radical adaptation in later contexts. On the whole, the composite themes include celebrations during sunrise and sunset (Boyce, 1979, pp. 32–33; also, Boyce, 1975); master and cupbearer; and bull's blood, wine, and light. All are constant themes in Islamic Persian symbolism and they continually regenerate its identity. In Persian Sufi literature, there are three key features that convey the ancient ingredients of its ancestral past: master, cup, and wine, with the addition of a fourth common and continuing feature, light (often substituted for wine). Ibn al-Motazz invokes the sacred imagery of Iranian religiosity from its roots to the present in a swift poetic sweep: "And people uttered praise saying they saw a surprising thing; Light made of water in a fire made of grapes" (*Diwan Ibn al-Mu'tazz*, cited in Melikian-Chirvani, 1990, p. 104).

The "master" appears under various aliases: cupbearer (*saqi*), boon companion, friend, and so on. Melikian-Chirvani draws a parallel between the "cup" or "goblet" (*badeh*) and crescent-shaped "wine-boats" that represent the Sufi's begging bowl (*kashkul*). Wine would be poured out of a vessel known in literature as a "bull" into drinking cups reproducing the crescent shape designed as a boat. The *kashkul* is meant to have served as a wine vessel as is demonstrated by many verses inscribed on it (Melikian-Chirvani, 1992, p. 101). "Wine" is the classic symbol of illumination, initiation, and sacred knowledge. Javad Nurbakhsh explains that the "wine" is "the intuitive savour of the recollection of God within a Sufi's heart, inducing a heady intoxication [...]". It is the "boiling up of love" inside the seeker through devotional and contemplative exercises. This love is described as being possessed by those who are perfected (in love) and realised

at the end of the "path" (Nurbakhsh, 2000, pp. 143, 149). The Sufi master (like Mithra) has the personal power with which to retrieve the bull's blood and disseminate the "illuminating wine". There are many elaborate descriptions in the Sufi poetry of Nezami and Khaqani in the second half of the twelfth century of what appears to be the "ceremonial drinking of wine poured out of a wine-bull into a crescent-moon cup, i.e. a wine-boat". These ceremonies in fact describe the theme of initiation of the Sufi lover (*asheq*) by the "Magian master". Further correlations are visible in a panegyric by Khaqani evoking the esoteric symbolism of an initiation rite involving "the drinking of wine poured out of a silver bull vessel into the golden boat filled with wine, symbolizing the conjunction of the moon and the sun" (Khaqani, *Diwan*, cited in Melikian-Chirvani, 1992, p. 117).

The 'ultimate synthesis' in Persianate Sufism is clearly spelled out in the following panegyric of the twelfth-century Persian poet:

> Remember the precepts of the Magian master […]
>
> The Sufi *Quran* reader tore his blue robe; his wine cup fell out from the top of its mast.[6]

These verses do not, strictly speaking, belong to Sufism. It is the activity of certain Persian Sufis who adapt the cultural productions of the local poets to their own needs, and thus stake a claim in the process of self-legitimation. They are a product of indigenous improvisation in the face of the introduction of a foreign ruling religion.

The case for Iran in Asia

A main task in this chapter was to initiate a shift from thinking about 'Iran/Iranianness' and 'Persia/Persianness' from Middle Eastern to what is arguably more accurately Central, West (and South) Asian. The production of the historical narrative and the associated notional constructs that underpin terms such as 'Persianate' or 'Iranian' are not restricted to the 'nationalism' discourse. I think it is important to see the fortunes of Iran and Iranians as part of a long and interrelated history of Asia. Richard Bulliet (1994) and Ali Ansari (2012), among others noted, have discussed at length the construction of identity and 'myth-history'; in my own work, I have also expanded on the nuanced processes of Iranian culturo-religious national identity (Milani, 2014).

Iran or 'Persia' as it was formerly known (prior to 1934) can be situated on a number of levels. I would like to begin with the geographic and then shift to the political discourse that surrounds this. What is strangely intriguing about Iran's geographical positioning is that it is incongruous – in a very literal sense geographically (but also, consequently, culturally, linguistically, and thus religiously) – within the region referred to as the Middle East. The reference to the 'Middle East' is a political, rather than a geographical, designator that stands for the parts of the 'non-western' world that were divided into world areas in the aftermath of WWII.

The reason I note this is precisely because of the difficulty faced by area-studies scholars engaged in the task of locating Iran within the history of the 'Modern Middle East' (cf., Choueiri, 2005).

Closer familiarity with the topography of Iran reveals the land to be separated by a natural geographic boundary – the mountainous terrain bordering the country, which is particularly dense on its western frontier. As an aside, because of the mountainous terrain guarding its western side, Iran has been conquered by military forces coming from the west only twice: first by Alexander in 334 BCE and second by the Arab Muslim invasions of the seventh century; whereas it has been conquered quite a number of times by military incursions from the east. Also, in the light of the difficulty in situating Iran in area studies, it is well worth noting that Iran sits neatly between the regions of Asia Minor and Levant and Asia proper (in a typical depiction of a map of the Middle East, Iran is the cut-off point to the east). In trying to understand Iran, scholars have quite often compared and coupled Iran with regions or nations (and their histories) to the west of the country. For example, Iran is typically compared with modern Turkey and, going further back in time, with ancient Greece. Whilst this is fine for general studies, little attention has been paid to the commonalities that Iran has with nations east of its borders; shifting geographical focus to the east can reveal a more nuanced history.

To explain this, I am going to draw on Richard Bulliet's life-long career effort in his study of Iran's human, animal, technological, and geographical history. I will refer generally to the many insightful lectures delivered during his tenure as Professor of History at Columbia (now freely available on both YouTube and through iTunes), which are expanded upon and substantiated in his publications; in particular, *Islam: the view from the edge* (1994) and *Cotton, climate, and camels in early Islamic Iran: a moment in world history* (2009). Bulliet broadly applies Everett Rogers' theory of the Diffusion of Innovations in order to contextualise the process for the spread of new ideas and the way that these new ideas are adopted or appropriated by the recipient societies.

In basic terms, the Diffusion of Innovations theory contains four main elements of influence for the spread of a new idea: the innovation, communication channels, time, and a social system. The innovation must be widely adopted in order to sustain itself. Within the rate of adoption, there is a point at which an innovation reaches saturation point or critical mass before it loses the rigour with which it started. Furthermore, the categories of adopters are: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers 1962, p. 150). This can be measured statistically using the 's curve' or 'logistic function' that demonstrates the rate of diffusion through the stages mentioned. The theory allows for the fact that diffusion of innovations manifests itself in different ways, in various cultures, and is subject to how it is received and the processes involved therein. Bulliet utilises diffusion theory as a practical way to observe Iranianness. In the example of the rise of Iran as the modern state, nationalism is a modern movement that spreads from western Europe to gradually find receptivity in the Ottoman empire, slowly affecting regions further east until eventually reaching Iran, admittedly quite late in the nineteenth century. Yet it is not to be taken for granted that regions east of

the nodal diffusion point are borrowing directly from regions west of their borders. I will explain this in Bulliet's language in terms of Iran's relationship to modern Turkey and ancient Greece, but before I do, it is worth noting that the diffusion theory is especially useful for the study of Iranian nationalism because it explains:

1. Why Iran is slow to modernise;
2. Why the Iranian national mood has undergone several contrasting cycles;
3. Why Iran continues to be a nation that struggles with internal conflict between traditional and modern sensibilities; and
4. Why Iran has oscillated between secular, dynastic, and religious attitudes, and continues to do so.

If we return to the comparison with modern Turkey, this is problematic initially because of what seems to be a neatly fitting parallel with Iran during the reign of Reza Shah. It is also problematic because the point of deception is its apparent synchronicity, and thus the subsequent urge to derive meaning. Indeed, Mustafa Kamal Atatürk (1881–1938) and Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944), both as the noted modernisers of their respective nations, have obvious commonalities. It is usually perceived that Reza Shah was influenced by the modernising reforms of Atatürk in Turkey, which he in turn carried out in Iran. This modernisation comparison takes for granted that Reza Shah (always, and often directly, inspired by Atatürk's reforms) sourced his ideas from Turkey. But rarely noted is the modernising ruler, to the east of Iran, and contemporary with the two of them, the Afghan king, Amanullah Khan (1892–1960, ruled 1919–1929). Whilst Reza Shah had made contact with Atatürk, the differences between them were quite deep; Reza Shah was probably more influenced by (or at least had much more in common with) Amanullah (to the east) rather than Atatürk (to the west). One example is that Reza Shah was impressed by the democratic reforms in Afghanistan and that he invited Amanullah and his wife, Soraya Tarzi, to pay an official visit to Iran in 1929. She, of course, was not wearing a hijab, and this seems to have triggered Reza Shah to emulate a similar reform in Iran (Mirrazavi, 2013).

Turning to an older problematic example of comparisons is that of Iran and Greece. The logic is typically that the ancient Greeks and the Persians were at war, so it only makes sense to study them together. However, not many look further east of Iran to note the comparisons with ancient India. For starters, Iran and India are closer linguistic cousins. They are of the Indo-Iranian stock within the broader Indo-European linguistic family. The two most ancient religious texts in the region (and, indeed, possibly in religious history) are the Avesta, which is the holy text of the ancient Iranian religion, and the Rig Veda, which is the holy text of the Brahmanic religion of ancient India. These two texts are linguistically identical, enough to suggest that Avestan, which also happens to be the name of the ancient Iranian language spoken circa the first millennium BCE, was reconstructed and made intelligible by modern scholars through comparisons with Vedic (the language of the Rig Veda).

In point of fact, if one observes the flow of social, cultural, and linguistic movement in the region, Iran would, to borrow Bulliet's metaphor, bleed eastward if it were a dye. Its language and culture are far more influential in countries east of Iran; namely, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Conversely, Iran is arguably far more receptive to exchanges with these regions rather than with those to its west. In a sense, Iran is far more on the defensive toward regions to its west, since these are regions that are not only culturally and religiously different, but also differ linguistically. The Persian language, which is an Indo-European language, is entirely different to Turkish and Arabic, which also makes it problematic to locate Iran within the construction phase of the history of Modern Middle East. Historically, the Persian language was the dominant literary language of Afghanistan and the dominant governing language of the Mughal rulers of India for hundreds of years. Persian language had an enormous impact on regions eastward and northeastward into Central Asia, where one can still speak Persian in Samarkand (city in Uzbekistan) and be understood.

In terms of religion, Iran is a Shi'ite nation, and has been since 1501. Yet its religious identity nevertheless betrays its ancestral heritage steeped in centuries of Zoroastrianism, and even still older customs of Old Pagan Iran. Iran is, by and large, home to an array of religious communities, both ancient and new (Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Bahai). To adapt Reza Hamzehee's monograph title, it is a land of countless religious revolutions (Hamzehee, 1991).

Iran fits awkwardly into the Middle East because of difference in language, culture, and religion, but also because its affinities were, historically speaking, generally eastward. Geographically, one might be better placed to argue that Iran fits better within Asia as a world area division, rather than with the Semitic cultures and Arab neighbours that lie westward. However, this does not change the fact that Iran has always had political aspirations westward. It had traditionally expanded both eastward and westward in its early history under the Persian kings, and this 'looking to the west' never really subsided, and was revived by Muhammad Reza Shah (the son and successor to Reza Shah Pahlavi) in his aspirations for a rapid modernisation and westernisation of Iran, albeit, whilst being specifically defined by its cultural past (Cooper, 2016).

Notes

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2 See, for example, the range of studies conducted by Lloyd Ridgeon and Leonard Lewisohn.
3 This date refers to the commonly accepted date for the beginning of the period of conquest of Iran. For a revisionist history of the conquest of Iran refer to Pourshariati (2008).
4 On conversion theories and dates see Bulliet (1994, p. 39).
5 For archeology of literature in Iranian poetry see Melikian-Chirvani (1992).
6 For full poem see Khaqani, *Diwan*, cited in Melikian-Chirvani (1992, p. 115).

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4 The open civilisation and the fundamentals of religion

Though it might seem counterintuitive to say so, especially in light of the years of 'terror' following September 11, Islam is – in the fullest sense of the phrase – the 'open civilisation'.[1] Islam is unique among the major world religions because the Muslim historical reality is made manifest as a polity from its inception. As such, it simultaneously comprises religious and civic ordinance. Islam, as such, cannot be conceived simply as a religious tradition, or merely a political system. Islam, properly conceived in full consideration of what it is phenomenologically, is a 'life world' or *Lebenswelt* (Husserl, 1970) containing both the religious and civic as synonymous notions that make up a major world civilisation that extends its influence over a significant portion of the globe for over a thousand years. This chapter will unpack this view in its full complexity, but will do so with a view to making a point about Sufi political engagement within the arena of 'Islam'.

All in all, the Sufi experience within the domain of Muslim politics has been fairly unassuming. Of the long list of 'controversial' Sufis that can be conjured, a much shorter list of figures amount to incidences even remotely contentious. In fact, from a short list of just the best-known Sufis, only three are martyrs; four, if we count the semi-legendary assassination of Shams of Tabriz. Indeed, more violence has been initiated by, and blood has been spilt over, disputes about creed than matters concerning the Sufis. This is partly because Sufis were themselves of particular creeds (*madhahib*, singular *madhhab* (formally, a school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*)). Those of them that were charged and tried on account of heresy were served with a 'law suit' concerning disputes about doctrine. For the charge of heresy, the execution edict for each of the noted martyred Sufi figures was based on a legal-theological accusation. Notwithstanding, there was a distinct hostility between the exoteric and esoteric practitioners of Islam. The tensions (and frustrations) of the Sufi experience as against the rigidity of interpretation presented by the *ulama* (the class of scholars devoted to exoteric religion) were of significant value, and they were circulated in Sufi literature, the surviving documents assisting closer scholarly scrutiny.

Below is a short list of some of the iconic and celebrated figures of Sufi literature (Table 4.1). I am deliberately limiting the list to these figures as some have renowned and oft-cited sayings, which are now commonplace in Sufi parlance. Others are listed whose life example is noted in Sufi literature for its heuristic

Table 4.1 Chronological list of well-known and contentious Sufi figures

	Sufi figure	*Reflections*
1.	Rabia al-Adawiyya (c.714/18–801)[a]	A prominent anecdote attributed to her is running through the streets with a bucket of water in one hand and a torch in the other. When asked why, she said one is to put out the fires of Hell and the other to burn Paradise – both are distractions from loving God (i.e., fear of punishment and anticipation of reward).
2.	Bayazid al-Bistam (804–874)	"Glory be to Me! How great is My majesty!" and "I am He".
3.	Dhul Nun al-Misri (796–859)	Known for the stories attributed to him. An exponent of the path of gnosis (*ma'rifa*) in Sufism.
4.	Mansour al-Hallaj (858–922)[b]	Martyred.
5.	Abu'l Hassan al-Kharaqani (963–1033)	"There are 24 hours in a day. I die a thousand times in an hour, and I cannot explain the other 23 hours".
6.	Abu Said Abu'l Khayr (967–1049)	Known as an antinomian mystic and has been attributed with the ability to perform miracles and read minds.
7.	Ahmad Ghazali (c.1061–1126)	A Hallajian and exponent of the school of love in Sufism.
8.	Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani (1098–1131)[c]	Martyred.
9.	Suhrawardi Maqtul (1154–1191)[d]	Martyred.
10.	Attar Nishapuri (c.1145–c.1220)	A biographer of Sufis and mystical poet. His works posit the consistent theme of deliverance through self-knowledge.
11.	Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240)	The 'Great Sheikh' of al-Andalus. Most famous for disclosing the theory of perfection of self as the manifestation of divine.
12.	Jalaludin Rumi (1207–1273)	Known with reverence among many who adore him as "sovereign lord, our master" (*khodavandegar mawlana*), Rumi. Famously referred to by Jami as not a prophet, but having produced scripture in the Persian tongue. His work expounds on the task of overcoming the self in order to experience God directly, a process within reach to everyone according to his or her capacity.

[a] Though not officially a Sufi, her legacy is immortalised in Sufi literature along with other great early Muslim pietists (and ascetics), and her sayings are given significant mystical value.

[b] He was tried and executed in Baghdad. Ḥallaj received a thousand lashes, had his feet and hands cut off, and was eventually hanged to death on the gibbet. His corpse was burned and the ashes poured into the Tigris (Mojaddedi, 2003).

[c] After being detained in Baghdad, Ayn al-Quzat was sent back to his hometown in Hamadan. Yet upon the arrival of the Saljuq sultan Maḥmud, he was tortured and put to death at the age of 33 – He was flayed, crucified, rolled up in a mat, and burned alive – by order of the sultan in 1131, along with several high officials with whom he had close ties (Böwering, 2011).

[d] Met a violent death by execution in Aleppo in 1191 by order of the Ayyubid sultan Salah al-Din. Suhrawardi's execution was directly connected to his involvement in politics, as a result of his efforts to implement the "Illuminationist political doctrine" which he had taught to several late 12th century rulers, among them the sultan's young son the prince al-Malik al-Ẓahir Ghazi, governor of Aleppo (Ziai, 1990).

Table 4.2 Summary of the date and location of the three 'great' martyrs

Sufi figure	*Date of execution*	*City of execution*
Mansour al-Hallaj	922 CE	Baghdad
Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani	1131 CE	Hamadan
Suhrawardi Maqtul	1191 CE	Aleppo

value, that in most cases tested the boundaries of 'normative' mainstream religiosity. I have separated these from those who are considered Sufi martyrs to make a clear point about the enduring elasticity and responsiveness of the Islamic legal-political 'anatomy' when it comes to interpreting matters of religion. The fact that the figures on this list were incredibly versatile in their 'Islam' and operated without affliction from either the authorities or the populace, bolsters the view that medieval Muslim society was richly layered and indeed multitudinous in its understanding of doctrine. It is also telling of another fact. The discrepancy (of three out of twelve Sufi figures being martyred) supports the view that being 'Islamic' varies, and that the variations, however grand or small, are tolerated by the authorities, both in general and in principle. Such strong views were also defensible within reason and with respect to the rationalisation of religious context in reference to the Qur'an and Hadith. It is undoubtedly true that regardless of however unconventional some of the views as presented by those not martyred on the list, their doctrinal position was nevertheless justifiable within the scope of Islamic canon. What marks these figures of Sufism is their being political, not just simply in the sense that all Muslims were political *à la* Aristotle (since there was no official separation of 'church and state' in Islamic polity), but *political* in the pure 'Islamic' sense of fulfilling the activity of the sacred in the secular domain. What distinguishes those few that were martyred is their unfortunate (or intended, in the case of Hallaj) entanglement in realpolitik. And yet, the frequency with which three of the best-known cases of Sufi martyrdom occurred is separated by a good number of years (see Table 4.2.).

In the following segment, I will expand on the definition of 'Sufi martyr' in the context of Islam, and also situate the religio-political conditions that underpinned the martyrdom of the three Sufi figures noted in the list (Table 4.1.).

The 'Sufi martyr'

My usage of 'martyr' in the Islamic context requires clarification. I am taking the liberty to borrow a recognised Christian term, applied here for its obvious meaning, but it is a term that also has a parallel in Islam. The Arabic is *shahid*, literally meaning 'witness' – as does the Greek cognate *martyrs* (μάρτυσ), meaning 'witness'. It is not typical for the term to be employed in the Islamic context in the same way as the Christian. That is, it is broadly used to indicate the act of witnessing God (as in the first pillar, the Shahada: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger"), and more specifically as that of a believer who has died on the field of battle. The Qur'anic use of *shahid* is generic, and only once

is the term deployed to indicate a person who is killed for their faith (3:141). It is in the Hadith literature that this concept is expanded on – in conjunction with the notion of *jihad* and its corresponding literature (primarily, a Muslim institution denoting "struggle against unbelievers") – to fully convey the idea of religious martyrdom. Though it might be possible to argue for the persecution of the early Meccan followers of Muhammad as martyrs who died for confessing their faith, this has not become the predominant conceptualisation of the Muslim martyr. In Sunni Islam, the association is strongly linked to those fallen in battle, and the rewards of paradise that awaits them. The development of such a concept of those tragically slain by the enemies of the faith belongs to Shi'a literature. This has admittedly closer correlation with Christian notions of martyrdom, in the sense of those persecuted for their beliefs (not as literal, but figurative 'soldiers' of God). Yet even taking the example of the murder of Ali ibn Abi Talib (the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, ruling over the Islamic caliphate from 656 to 661, later idealised as the first Shi'a Imam and the rightful successor to the Prophet by the Shi'a) who was struck with a poisoned sword in the mosque during prayer, and his younger son, Hussein (d. 680), who was slaughtered at the Iraqi town of Karbala facing insurmountable military forces, both were victims of political assassination. Still, both Ali and Hussein are martyrs, at least, in the sense that they were arguably aware of impending death (Daftary, 2014). Nevertheless, it is Hussein's martyrdom that marks a focal point in Shi'a consciousness. Subsequently, it is Shi'a quietist narrative, built around the persecution and killing (*maqtal*) of noted Imams – given its obvious parallels with Christian martyrdom – that cements a looser notion of martyrdom within the Islamic context. The special sense in which the idea of the martyr comes to be established within Islamic consciousness, however, is theologically infused politics, which in effect stands apart from the Christian notion of martyrdom as primarily having a metaphysical intentionality. That is to say, the death of the Christian martyr does not – strictly speaking – have any worldly ties, but the Muslim martyr – in both the Sunni and Shi'a sense – are for the sake of the Islamic polity.

A martyrdom operation, in the sense of 'suicide missions', is another development in the Islamic context. It is a commonly overlooked historical fact that martyrdom operations are theoretically prohibited in Sunni Islam. Of course, those who die in the cause of *jihad* are guaranteed to become martyrs, but this is not condoned in classical sources; rather, the idea develops gradually and through later legists who endorse martyrdom for a holy cause. Classical sources maintain that it is forbidden to set out with the intention of dying in battle – note Quran 4:29. Shi'ites disagree in principle. Given that the martyrdom of Hussein, and the other Twelver imams, is inclusive in the sense of victimhood that pervades the Shi'ite ethos, the Shi'ite tradition has historically condoned suicide practices. The most famous example of carrying out martyrdom operations in Islamic history is the Shi'ite Isma'ili Assassins. A modern historical example is the Shi'ite group Hezbollah (The Party of God), who executed their first martyrdom operation in Beirut in 1983. Martyrdom operations, in this sense, effectively remain combat strategies that literally weaponise the devotee. Their efficacy is today measured

by the approach being defined as a cheap, low-tech method of warfare. It has since grabbed the attention of Sunni Islamists, some of whom have taken to its practice, but it is agreed that this was only done so hesitantly, and the question of the permissibility of martyrdom operations continues to be a hotly debated topic amongst Sunni Muslim authorities (see Silverstein, 2010, p. 115f).

The notion of martyrdom has a potent follow through in Sufi history (Ernst, 1985), though in the composite Sufi materials on martyrdom, the 'Sufi martyr' emerges as a comparable figure to the Christian martyrs. This is independent of, and beyond, the fallen soldier (Sunni Islam) and murdered sectarian rival (Shi'a Islam). It is somewhat akin to the 'suicide missions', but devoid of the act of violence upon another. The Sufi martyr sought only his or her own death for the sake of unification with the 'beloved'. It would seem that such a strong notion of achieving mystical union with God, the Sufi beloved, had its practical beginnings in the classical period with the activities of early Muslim frontiersmen and ascetics, some of whom were occasionally killed for their beliefs. Also, that the idealisation of some of the earlier zealots, and their incorporation into Sufi literature as martyr-saints, bolstered the Sufi missionary activities of the medieval period. Sufis active on the imperial borderland would often seek martyrdom by preaching Islam, and occasionally being martyred by those they sought to convert. The well-known story of Attar deliberately seeking a violent death, but implied martyrdom, is a good example. This story can be used as a trope for the destruction of the ego (*nafs*), but more aptly as an overwhelming statement of faith in the sacrifice of one's life. During the Mongol invasion of Persia in 1220, so the legend goes, Attar was seized. One Mongol said: "Do not kill this old man; I will give a thousand pieces of silver as a ransom for him". Attar dissuades his captor from the purchase and tells him that he is worth much more than the offered sum. Shortly after, someone else offers a mere bag of straw for him. Attar said: "Sell me for the straw for that is all that I am worth" and the infuriated Mongol instantly killed him (Hanif, 2002). In the case of Sufi martyrs, the point is that the openness of religious interpretation and the discretionary and versatile nature of legal apparatus were such that those who died for their beliefs were not victims of the system, but of their own purposeful desire for martyrdom. The martyr par excellence, Hallaj, openly courted martyrdom, and those that did so, *in spirit*, after him, were provoking the same reaction from the authorities (e.g., Ernst, 1985, pp. 313, 317).

The crux of visiting the related martyrdom theme here is that there were many Sufis who held vastly divergent views, but none of whom were met with open hostility. Many of those that were 'martyred' set out with this goal in mind. Furthermore, the hostilities that emerged, and those that were elevated to the caliph's court in Baghdad, were from the ground up, not top-down. Filing a *fatwa* (certificate of opinion) against a fellow Muslim was difficult to verify, as the practice required a wide range of opinions that were presided over by a judge (*qadi*).[2] But this was – in certain circumstances – expedited through the enmity that existed between benefactors. The case of Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani (d. 1131) serves as a good historical example. Ayn al-Quzat was of a prominent family of judges, and himself a qualified judge. He was executed along with several affiliates also of

high standing (Böwering, 2011). Ayn al-Quzat's Islam roused the hostility of local *ulama* (exoteric scholars), but it seems the real force of intervention that made the charge 'stick' was that of a rival of his own benefactor (Böwering, 2011). The interesting point of connection here is with Hallaj. Ayn al-Quzat was a 'Hallajian', in that he was a student of Ahmad Ghazali (the brother of the renowned Imam Ghazali (Abu Hamid, d. 1111)). In his key Persian work *Tamhidat*, or "Preludes", he expounds on the subtleties of his mystical outlook with support from Qur'anic references and established Sufi proverbs. There are numerous examples of his writings that demonstrate a heterodox attitude, but perhaps the most pronounced is his reconciliation of the paradox of belief and unbelief. Ayn al-Quzat was essentially an unconventional mystic. In true Hallajian form; for him, Iblis (Satan) symbolised the juncture of faith and doubt / belief and disbelief (*iman* and *kofr*), because it was Satan alone who refused to obey God's command and bow before the newly created Adam (Q 2:34, 7:11–13, 17:61–62).[3] The proposition reformulates Satan as the prototype of unbelief and instead personifies him as custodian of *tawhid*, 'divine singularity', and *majnun*, 'the mad lover' of God, which redefines Satan's defiant act as the ultimate profession of monotheism and of the worship of God alone, the absolute aim of mysticism being the complete love of God. This theme is a clear indication of Hallaj's influence on Ayn al-Quzat, who is the first Sufi to openly cite the former's work *Tawasin* (Massignon, 1982a, p. 42).

Al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), also an erudite, and a well-travelled scholar, produced many writings in the category of both mysticism and philosophy. As a distinguished esoterist, he rationalised creation as an emanation – in continuum – of God as Light (see Ziai, 1990). His commentary and critique of Aristotelian methodology was inspired by Plato's idea of sudden inspiration conveyed in light imagery (Plato, *Seventh letter*, 341C, 344B; refer to Bury, 1966). The topic is discussed in his best-known work, *Hikmat al-Ishraq* ("The Wisdom of Illumination"). Through his 'illuminationist' philosophy, Suhrawardi made significant advancement in the integration of the categories in which he wrote, utilising technical philosophical language to document knowledge of the intuitive aspects of mystical experience. His achievements were a reflection of his own person as both educator of rulers and spiritual leader of the School of Illumination, which he founded. One of a number of his patrons from the politically fractured Muslim world was the son of Salahaddin, Malik al-Zahir, governor of Aleppo, whom he impressed after securing an audience with the ruler. Suhrawardi's fall from grace and execution is yet again typically characteristic of the Islamic polity as theologically infused politics. Suhrawardi was quickly recognised as a distinguished scholar in Aleppo, but during the course of his stay there, from 1183 to 1191 (the date of execution) he had done much to estrange the religious elite of the city who happened to be integral to the ruling Ayyubids in legitimating their control over its domain. Suhrawardi's desire to apply his philosophical doctrine to the politics of the time – what is now known as his 'illuminationist political doctrine' – was in direct conflict with the interests of the *ulama*. The *ulama* – commonly used as a euphemism, intended as a derogatory sentiment among Sufis, for those advocates of exoteric religion or literalists – legitimated their own existence based on their

sway over the populace. Suhrawardi's political doctrine can be seen as akin to Plato's vision of the just ruler, with the modification of a somewhat divine right of kings (*farr*) overtone, and left him open to strong criticism. This was enough to arouse opposition among the *ulama* who then pursued the governor al-Zahir for the charge of heresy to be levelled against Suhrawardi. The accusation of heresy was, in part, the way to secure his execution, but it is unlikely to have been the main reason for the provocation of the *ulama*. In any case, Suhrawardi's teachings in general, and particularly the pantheistical nuance that it carried (through his symbolic language and borrowing of foreign pre-Islamic terms conveying Persian, Greek, and Egyptian notions), was enough to paint him a heretic in the eyes of the sultan. Furthermore, it has to be said that the force of his personal charisma and presence in the city, in addition to having found favour with the city's ruler, was a major contributing factor in forcing the hand of the *ulama*. The label *al-maqtul* ('the Killed'), which now accompanies his name, was meant to divest him of the honour of being recognised a *shahid* ('martyr').

The incidences of the three Sufi martyrs in focus here are largely disconnected, apart from the fact that Ayn al-Quzat is linked by ideology to the legacy of Hallajian-style Sufism. Yet each incidence is connected through a shared sense of religio-political complication. Mansour al-Hallaj (d. 922), or Hallaj, as he is commonly known in Sufi literature, met a brutal end at the hands of the chief of police, following a period of nine years' incarceration. Hallaj was not the founder of any such 'Hallajian' group, though he was highly influential – both throughout his travels and in Baghdad – as a Sufi master, drawing a large following to himself. After an initial period of ascetic retreat, in which he sought to achieve his own way to God, he travelled widely across West Asia (Khuzistan and Khurasan) and into Central, and South, Asia (India and Turkistan), carried by a fervent missionary zeal. During the course of his life, he twice made pilgrimage to Mecca, after which he returned to settle in Baghdad with his family where he spent a great deal of time in prayer by night and preaching by day. By all accounts, and in spite of the oft-portrayed vagueness of his actual affiliation, Hallaj was a devout apostle of Islam, though of course, what this meant to him, and how he understood his faith could not be pursued in greater detail here. What is clear, however, is that he not only advocated controversial views about faith, but also that he openly invited martyrdom in the final stage of his life. Unlike Ayn al-Quzat and Suhrawardi, whose lives were cut short at the ages of 33 and 37 respectively, Hallaj lived a full life, and was only executed at the age of 64. This is partly because of his exceptional influence and strong political backing. Hallaj had powerful supporters in high office, even in Baghdad, where he had the trust of the vizier, Ibn Isa, and that of the queen mother (Massignon and Gardet, 2012). Hallaj was socially and politically active during a time when Baghdad was a place of considerable political conflict. He influenced a movement of moral and political reform in Baghdad where those in support perceived him to be a messianic figure, which in Sufi terminology is rendered *qutb* or 'pole', the recognised ecumenical spiritual head of the age. He was involved in a failed sectarian rebellion, which forced him to seek refuge in a nearby town, before being arrested and brought to Baghdad.

The trial of Hallaj lasted for only two years thanks to his benefactor, Ibn Isa, who managed to eventually collapse the hearing. Yet Hallaj did not go unpunished; due to mounting pressure from the vizier's own enemies, which included the chief of police, Hallaj was pilloried as an enemy of the state. He then remained for the rest of his time in Baghdad effectively under house arrest, confined to the palace, where he continued to preach and produce the bulk of his writings. It was the heterodox nature of these writings that stirred the opposition again, prompting a second inquiry into the circumstances of his trial. In a turn of events, Hallaj's sponsor was replaced with a new vizier, Ibn al-Furat, who was opposed to Hallaj. He motioned to have the trial revisited, but was blocked by another of Hallaj's sponsors from the caliph's court. The case against Hallaj was finally reopened under al-Furat's successor, Hamid. Hamid, with the support of a compliant *qadi*, 'judge', ensured the outcome as a *fait accompli*. In the end, Hallaj was not given a fair trial because the proceedings lacked proper representation of views, on top of which 84 signatories were unexpectedly produced to seal his fate. The inevitable judgement was that it was lawful to spill the blood of Hallaj. Now Hallaj, it seemed, was resigned to his fate, and, in fact, had been already calling the people to task: "O Muslims, save me from God [...] God has made my blood lawful to you: kill me […]" (Massignon and Gardet, 2012). On the official records, the basis of the second trial of Hallaj was a charge of heresy. However, the actual reason behind the indictment and Hallaj's resulting condemnation was an altercation between Hamid and Ibn Isa, with the former using Hallaj as a means through which to destroy his rival. At length, what the trial of Hallaj reveals (altogether lasting from 911 to 922) is the complex and layered society that Baghdad embodied as a major political hotbed. Within the fold of Islam, the episodes from the life of Hallaj further still reveal the diversity of religious opinion, and the nuanced understanding of faith and its legal application over matters of creed. The main accusation against Hallaj was not the infamous utterance *ana'l haqq* "I am [the God] Truth", but rather that he had said it is important to circumambulate the 'Ka'ba' of one's heart seven times. The pretext being that he opted for the building of model replicas of the Ka'ba (the House of God) for those unable to undertake pilgrimage – it appears that he had already built a replica in his own home for private worship (Massignon, 1982a, pp. 592–594; 1982b, pp. 546–547; see also Ernst, 1985, pp. 106–110).

The context of Hallaj's lifetime was one of particular religious volatility among the representatives of the creeds, but also because the Sufi movement was similarly in the process of being coordinated with the wider religious developments of the time (Green, 2012). All in all, Hallaj was a force with which to be reckoned. His unconventional approach gained him many enemies from among the rank of Sufis as well as from among the experts of exoteric religion. The Sufis were particularly appalled by Hallaj's divulgence of the mysteries of Sufi teachings, one consequence of which was that his first teacher, Amr Makki, cut ties with him on account of his breaking the code of secrecy. Hallaj was an independent figure, which is testament to his inability to keep a Sufi master for

any duration of time. Yet his legacy has left its unmistakable mark on the Sufi literary tradition, especially among the Sufis of Iran. Of his most famous, and thus contentious, analogies for conveying mystical union was his use of the moth and the lamp, whereby the moth is burning itself away (Massignon, 1982a, pp. 170–171; 1982b, pp. 16–17). This is drawn from the biblical imagery through which Hallaj compares himself with Moses' burning bush (Massignon, 1974, p. 23). The symbolism conveys a deliberate invocation of specific imagery that inculcates a single idea (of longing to become utterly obliterated in God). Combined with his meditation on the ascension of Muhammad (*mi'raj*), in which the Prophet ceases to advance at two bow shots from God, such semiotics suggests that a union in love was possible beyond the experience of Muhammad. The other major theme in Hallaj's writings was the notorious reference to Satan as already described in Ayn al-Quzat's reproduction. Whilst Ayn al-Quzat's reference is theoretical, Hallaj had a more practical message at hand. Evidenced by the extensive treatment of this theme in his *Tawasim*, where Hallaj identified with the Fallen Angel and glorified him, an astounding assertion is made by the author. Not only was Satan an unaffected and obdurate monotheist, but, in a way, the 'angelic martyr' of God. Hallaj turns the revelatory narrative on its head in suggesting that it is not pride, as the Qur'anic passage is generally read, but absolute and uncompromising piety that is the cause of Satan's demise. And this demise was not an indication of God's wrath, but rather a sign of the elect of God (Pourjavadi, 2013, p. 108).

Fitting within the genre of the lover and the beloved as emblemised by the story of Leyla and Majnoun, Satan was for those Sufis who understood and accepted this reading, the archetypal example of the lover who is always the recipient of the beloved's scorn. This theme of the 'disobedient monotheist' becomes a powerful literary apparatus to communicate the real meaning of Hallaj's claim. He too was unflinchingly devoted to God and ready to be treated with contempt as a mark of His love and as a sign of being granted a secretly elevated station in the eyes of God. During the final years of his life, Hallaj invited persecution and the inevitable death sentence that followed; less understood are the reasons for his decision. Interest in early European scholarship on Hallaj advanced the view of him as a secret Christian; yet the aim of Massignon's seminal study was to establish Hallaj in the context of Islamic mysticism. Notwithstanding the need to locate Hallaj in the Islamic milieu, there are remarkable parallels between the 'passion of Hallaj' and the Passion of Jesus (Milani, 2012) – parallels not denied by Massignon. One glaring example is that Hallaj maintained a literal, and not figurative, path to union with God made possible through love and suffering. As such, he saw it necessary to transcend the legal framework of the *umma* ('[religious] community') by offering himself as a sacrifice for it in freely submitting to its laws (Massignon and Gardet, 2012).

Both the themes of annihilation in God and Satan's monotheism are now iconic in Sufi literary symbolism, but especially among the Persians: Ahmad Ghazali, Ayn al-Quzat, and Ruzbehan Baqli, who are considered 'Hallajian'. The legacy of this monumental figure of Sufi history survived his death and for a while even

his omission from the biographical accounts of later Sufis (e.g., Abu Nu'aym and Qushayri, except for Sulami. See Mojaddedi, 2001). While the great Hujwiri made the first attempt to rehabilitate Hallaj, he did so by arguing a case of mistaken identity. However, it is not until Attar's biographical account of the Sufi saints that the glorification of Hallaj – having given him the pride of place in his tome – was augmented in Sufi literature.

The Sufis, in point of fact, exercised great authority, and maintained a significant level of autonomy, which was only to grow over time as the movement became better organised and later institutionalised. The basis for the political successes of Sufism is the fertile religious soil from which it sprang and the favourable social conditions that allowed it to prosper.

The status quo

I will now turn to the question of Islam as the open civilisation. First, I will begin by contextualising the state of affairs of a Muslim governing body. It is important provide the general outline of the status quo in order to unpack the question posed. In the remainder of this chapter I will proceed to address the various layers of what is meant by the open civilisation in this book, and, furthermore, how this notion relates to the contradictory appearance of the fundamentals of religion. This phrase is not to be confused with fundamentalism, which is an interpretation of Islamic history based on a purely isolated appreciation of the fundamental components of the faith as such.

Despite the generally nebulous quality of the Qur'anic text, it did provide considerable foresight for medieval Muslims on matters of religious tolerance. It certainly gave legists the needed capacity to develop policies with greater lenience and recognition of difference. Based on this, Muslim overlords granted the protection of the state to those of their non-Muslim subjects who had *dhimmi* status, but who were expected to pay a special levy called *jizya* (since they were not obligated to pay the *zakat*) in return. Arab Muslims of the first centuries of conquest were content as overlords to a religiously diverse population. The religious communities enjoyed state protection, but with due social restriction (Karsh, 2006.). Later, when a significant portion of the population had become Muslim, the same legal and economic legislations – based on the Qur'anic edict to leave the judgement of other religions to God (22:17) – were widely applied to any number of individuals living in Muslim lands. The '*dhimmi* contract' was only available to non-Muslim subjects of Muslim lands, and originally only possible based on passages from the Qur'an that identified a special category for the 'people of the book' – Jews, Sabians, and Christians – who 'submit to God', accepting the revelation of Islam and that of their own scripture (3:199). Yet the grace of the Qur'an is extended with certain limitations in its extolment of those of kindred faith. In several passages, it cautions on the integrity of 'their' faith, stating that only a portion of 'them' have faith (3:110) and stand for the right (3:113). This rule was also made applicable to religions – such as Zoroastrianism and Hinduism – not formally mentioned in the relevant passages of the Qur'an, ensuring basic-level civil rights for all religious

communities subject to Muslim rule. Apart from this, early Muslim-ruling dynasts were scarcely interested in the religious affairs of their subjects; nor was the Islamic state of the Abbasids overly concerned with inquisitions or persecutions in the same way that Christendom and Sasanid Persia obsessed over flushing out heresies. The main energy of Muslim rulers (and claimants to power) was spent on civil war – wars between Muslims of varying religio-political leanings. These were effectively wars or rebellions based on contentions to rule according to religious pedigree. In fact, the perennial concern of Muslims (even up to the present day) has been the question of interpretation of religion and legitimation of rule. Yet, as mentioned, the Islamic tradition features both longitudinal and latitudinal scope for dealing with variety and complexity, acting as a failsafe against rigid dogmatism, at least, until the modern era.

Islamic polity: religion and the state in Muslim historical consciousness

The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project has estimated the exponential growth of Islam as the numerically dominant faith in the world (Pew Research Centre, 2012). There are as many questions about the future of Islam in the western context as there are questions about its future in Muslim majority countries. Analogous to this are questions pertaining to the processes involved in the production of Muslim identity construction and the relationship of Muslims to government (western or otherwise). Such inquiry implicitly yearns for a review of past events, but doing so with the hope of gaining better insight into what is unfolding in the present moment. As a scholar of religion, I want to emphasise the evolution of religion through history and in society, but also important is the same unfolding of religious phenomena in the mind of the agents of history and society. Framed within religious studies and the history of ideas, this chapter presents an attempt to think through issues relating to religion and the state in order to examine the dynamics of their relationship in Islamic (political) history. A major source of inspiration for writing a book on Sufi political thought comes from Richard Bulliet's revisionist history of Islamic society. His re-evaluation of the way that Islamic society has evolved incorporates approaches ranging from environmental history to the history of technology, economics, and animals in human society. A recognised authority on medieval Islamic history, Bulliet's work has established an account of the past defined by the role of the vast majority of people who lived outside the political orbit and who did not place emphasis on the caliphate as central to their lives. What comes into view in Bulliet's reconstruction of the past is chiefly derived from a detailed reading of local biographical dictionaries, giving a fuller perspective of the history and the role of Islam in the everyday life of its adherents. His advance of the "view from the edge", that is, history of Islam as defined by the story of those outside the traditional narrative, has presented a challenge to the typical view of Islamic history "from the centre", the master narrative, so to speak, portraying Islamic history "as an outgrowth from a single nucleus, a spreading

inkblot labelled 'the caliphate'" (Bulliet, 1994, p. 8). The view from the centre leaves questions unanswered:

> Where did all those Muslims come from? Why did they develop a coherent culture of civilization while Europe, despite its Christian homogeneity, was so fractious and diverse? If their society is legitimately tagged with a religious label, what is the role of religion in that society? Whom do people follow? Who responds to their needs?
>
> (Bulliet, 1994, pp. 7–8)

The view from the edge seeks to address questions such as:

> But what other than a political label held Islam together? And why did its political cohesion evaporate after little more than two centuries, never to reoccur?
>
> (Bulliet, 1994, p. 8)

For Bulliet, the question of the separation of 'church and state' in Islamic history is an important one, and one that provides an explanation for the above conundrum. This separation is important because it addresses the age-old concern of 'just rule', and by doing so it exposes the fault line upon which religion and politics meet in Islam. To continue with the metaphor, shifts in the tectonic plate of Islam's geography began much earlier. Bulliet explains this by revisiting the central narrative with a revisionist eye. He locates the occurrence of the above curiosities in the second half of the tenth century, during the Abbasid caliphate, when the role of Caliph becomes noticeably less political and more religious. I will discuss this in further detail below. Highlighting a pressure point where religion and politics meet in Islamic history reveals an important fact about Muslim preoccupation with the interface between religious understanding and social order; more specifically, how the former was to shape the latter. Islamic history is, in this sense, very much a continuation of interpretation of a particular set of information and events. It is, in an unconventional way, a 'stream of consciousness' of Islamic existential inquiry. The political history of Islam demonstrates a longstanding practice of distinguishing, though not separating, the role of 'religion' and 'politics' in Muslim state governance. Yet more specific attention paid to transformations within the Muslim civilisation from the latter half of the tenth century onward indicates a discretionary balance that defines what seems to be an Islamic model of a separation of 'church and state' in western parlance.

In *Islam and capitalism*, Maxime Rodinson (1966) noted that Islamic precepts are neutral in political activity, and that they define the nature of Muslim polity in changing situations. It would not be difficult to see, then, how aspects of Islamic history are defined by diversity and tolerance, whilst at other points in time its history is coloured by the 'puritanical' current defined as myopic and regressive. Islamic history is, thus, both in theory and practice 'translated' by human agency, and not always with recourse to the full complexity of the Muslim historical past (Hughes, 2007, 2012, 2015). The past, as R.G. Collingwood stated, is a spectacle

always in motion, and the Islamic past is no exception; it is not static and does not yield itself to a definitive or categorical rendition (Collingwood, 1946; Silverstein, 2010, pp. 1–7). Looking at this past, then, involves interpreting people and their actions as defined by the environments in which the events of Islamic history have unfolded. Collingwood's framing of the relationship between history and memory is a point worth considering because the neutrality of Islamic religious precepts in political activity, as Rodinson argued, underlines the view that religion is applied to social life through varying agendas. Rodinson was convinced that there was nothing antagonistic – in principle – within the religion of Islam that would place it at odds with economics, or so with other innovations (such as cultural, social, or artistic) that were to emerge.

Ever since the death of the Prophet there have been many questions, and disputes, among the early community concerning the right to succession and the application of faith. The notion of the caliph, and its parallel notion of the imam, was the immediate response, since Muhammad was considered by the community to have been the last of the Prophets. However, the role of the successor (conceived as either the caliph or imam) brought about a second tier of discussion on the nature of the function of the caliph or imam. It was not always clear exactly what relationship the office of the caliph or imam had to the corresponding political and religious authority within the community. In the long stretch of history, sometimes these were conceived of as complementary or blurred, and other times they were clearly made distinct. For the ease of discussion in this chapter, I am dividing Islamic history into three major periodic 'blocks' of time in order to make lucid the nature of relationship between religion and the state in Islamic history throughout the pre-modern period. These are: the era of the Prophet Muhammad until his death in 632; the successional caliphate, and its corresponding notion of the imamate until 1258; and the rise of the sultanate as an independent office formally replacing that of the caliphate from 1300 onward. In each of these blocks of time a specific correlation between religion and politics can be generally observed. The aim here is not to enter into a detailed periodic analysis, but rather to show the interchangeability of the role of religion and politics in Muslim political thought. At the height of Muslim civic rule, Muslim rulers did invest in pursuits of the arts and sciences in order to advance a burgeoning Muslim civilisation. The efforts of the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Umayyads in Cordoba, in fact, hail a 'Muslim renaissance', but not so in the eyes of religious zealots who held this to be part of the pomp and pride of the dynasts. For the latter, this was no more than an unsanctioned extra-religious undertaking to secure a place in the memory of men, since they would clearly not be permitted into the eternity of the divine. In the minds of competing adherents, there was, indeed, a sharp distinction between acts that served the glory of God and those devoted to vainglory.

The longest period in Islamic history is the imperial era, lasting from 661 (foundation of the first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyad) to 1924 (the official fall of the Ottoman super state). Yet this was also a time when peace-building efforts were periodically disrupted by the puritanical mode. This period – however, in usual reference to the caliphate of Baghdad (750–1258) – is properly known as

the 'golden age' of Islamic civilisation. This stands in contradistinction to what has also been perceived as the 'golden age' of Islamic religious triumphalism during the reign of the four righteous caliphs (*caliph al-rashidun*) (632–661). It is not the appropriateness of the reference that is a prerogative here, but what the reference betrays. For a little over a thousand years a succession of Muslim rulers had achieved relative stability across a vast empire. The rule of the dynasts can be described as one of permeated and urbane religious sensibility, whereas the rule of the *rashidun* was demarcated by a general and pervasive puritanical mood. In light of this, the traditionalist looks to the direction of the past, some with the hope to revive its former glory; whilst the modernist draws inspiration from the civilisation that was, with the hope for the same sense of plurality and universalism that defined the spirit of Islam.[4] This basic division is important to make known, and it is one that feeds into what is gradually brought to bear in Islamic political thought, albeit, in an ultra-nuanced way, as the Muslim model of demarcating religion and politics. And through it, the adaptability and resilience of Muslim polity is particularly pronounced in the face of internal (and external) adversity. The subtle division in sentimentality also demonstrates the flexible nature of religion and state relations, since the dichotomy is furthermore indicative of an uneasy relationship between 'the religious' and 'the civic', which is yet maintained without destroying the fabric of Muslim society or compelling the force of its faith to rescind. Islam, as a political reality and a dominant imperial presence in the pre-modern world, is essentially defined by perpetual internal conflict fuelled by its own factions. But this in-house mêlée is, nevertheless, in the context of medieval Islam, of such a nature that it instead feeds into the growth, and not the depletion of, Islamic governance. As an aside, the crisis of Islam, in the contemporary context, is not a drawback of the relationship between religion and politics, or the quandary of how to be religious and respect civic customs at the same time. Indeed, the basis of the overly emphasised 'catastrophe' in the present age has emerged from some quarters of the Muslim world with aspirations to re-adjust the balance of power in favour of an 'authentic' Muslim state rule. The same sentiment has consistently defined the 'puritanical' element in interjecting its own prescribed viewpoint, starting with the early 'defectors' or 'seceders' (*kharijites*) of the seventh century right through to 'Wahhabi and 'Salafi' developments in the modern period.

Though it may stand as a point of contention to highlight, it nevertheless needs to be considered that apart from the Prophet's own reign, there has never been an actual or real merger of religion and politics in Islamic history; only an effort to keep it from spreading apart. This is nowhere so markedly manifest as in the efforts of contemporary Islamists or political Islam. And even though this is often defined as the end game of political Islam in the modern world – to re-establish the caliphate – it is, nevertheless, a shared 'dream' of all Muslims to hark back to an ideal about the experience of lived 'Islam' in the time of the Prophet, however imagined. How interesting it is, then, to remember that the Medina Constitution and the Qur'anic text facilitated a noticeable juxtaposition of religion and politics, enough to delineate, if ever so subtly, religion and state functions.

What seem to be miniscule points of distinction in the early period of Islam are, however, teased out and come to the surface within the discourse of the 'golden age'. Wide-ranging developments in Muslim political thought, philosophy, and legality are but some of the areas within which Muslim intellectuals and scholars debated the nature of Islamic rule and religion. Muslim civilisational developments in the medieval period also had an important impact on the way that religion was read and applied by the growing number of converts. This also helped shape the religion of Islam in important ways throughout different regions of the empire (Bulliet, 1994, esp., pp. 67f, 145f). Bulliet's historiographical point about the shifting 'centre' is a reminder that Islamic history is a moving spectacle defined by the particular view of the past (Bulliet, 1994, p. 145). That, for instance, uniformity of Sunni Islam is achieved rather than primordial speaks to the implicit need of the community of believers to authenticate their faith by grounding it in the perceived unchanging tradition of a great founder (Bulliet, 1994, p. 145). Important population shifts due to economic hardships in Iran from the tenth through to the thirteenth century, for instance, are another good example of how views from the edge of Islamic society create a new centre, shaping Islamic history in completely new ways (Bulliet, 2009). Through the course of these changes, there are cultural and intellectual layers that add a new temperament to the way the Islamic canon is read, giving the sense of an implicit and developing 'civilisational intelligence' unfolding in Islamic history. This notion of a civilisational intelligence, for all intents and purposes, stands apart from what might be deemed as the 'fundamentals of (Islamic) religion'. The difference and its relationship will be explored in greater detail in what is to follow. What is for certain is that there are clear points of departure with the rise of the Muslim civilisation from that of the emergence of the religion with its ideological roots in the Islamic Hejaz.

Religion in the mirror of civilisation

The relationship between religion and politics is not always clearly portrayed in historical memory (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 180). Religion has been central to the political control of society from early on. The rise of Islam in the seventh century was a continuation of the role of religion in political life. Initially, Islam was a force that sought to effectuate social change in Arabia through revolutionary organisation and radical ideology. Yet, at least from the time of the Umayyad era, religion began to function more as a mechanism for state control. In view of this, it would seem that within half a century Islam has shifted from rebellious force to state religion. However, the process of alteration, visible throughout Islamic history, as manifest in cultural transformation and social change, is not indicative of shifts in the religion, but of the interpretation and application of the religion. This is because the ideal of 'Islam' is an abstraction. In the philosophical and social theory sense of the term, but specifically *à la* John Locke, the way in which Islam is perceived historically is a product of an ideational process or concept formation that, at the same time, has real and immediate consequences (Book II, *Essay*; see Mackie, 1976, pp. 47–51). Needless to say, 'Islam' as the object of

academic study, must necessarily be subject to the theories and methods analysis of construction and deconstruction in academic discourse (Hughes, 2012). Marshall Hodgson's concern for historical conscience, for instance, is a case in point that is picked up by scholars interested in the historiography of Islam, and interested in pointing out that 'Islam', in and of itself, does not *do* anything. Instead, it is Muslims who enable, through their construal, what Islam should or should not be *and* do in real life (Knysh, 2010, p. 3f). The backbone of this idea is in many ways thoroughly explored in Rodinson's work. Maxime Rodinson demonstrated that there is not a necessary causal connection between the religion of Islam and the collapse of the Muslim world economically (Rodinson, 1966, pp. 110f, 157f). His findings were crucial to the view that the religion of Islam was a neutral factor, exposing a fundamental myth of Islam's opposition to capitalism. Going beyond Weberian cultural reductionism, Rodinson's work confirmed a general flaw in viewing the politics and society of the Middle East by reference to what appeared to be an unchanging entity called 'Islam'.[5] Rodinson's framework – that the precepts of Islam neither created particular potential nor hindered the propensity for commercial activity – is useful here in one important sense: his findings help make the case that the precepts of religion are inconsequential to changes at state level, except, of course, when they are purposefully implemented as a means to an end (Rodinson, 1966, p. 235).

If it is accepted that Islamic precepts are neither for nor against socio-economic life, then the interpretation of religion and the legitimation of a particular reading of Islam strongly come into focus. The social and historical process by which Islam is imagined to unfold through time and space is linked to how the religion plays out in political life and how it is historicised. Here identified are two main historical interpretations of Islam that continue to influence the contemporary life of Muslims: the puritanical and the civilisational, or what I would prefer to call urbane. This influence was already apparent in the classical study by Marshall Hodgson who sought to explain 'Islam' in the context of world civilisation (Hodgson, 1974). The Hodgsonian distinction between 'Islamic' and 'Islamicate' helps demonstrate that the puritanical and civilisational interpretations each play a specific role in political life, as either blurring religion and state relations or treating them separately.

The conditions for the emergence of Islam can easily be linked to aspirations of social reform in a period of political instability beyond the borders of Arabia. The socio-economic motivation of Islam is evident in the established egalitarian nature of its foundational message, but often overshadowed by theological readings of its history (Bulliet, 1994, pp. 5–7).[6] The Islamic society that emerges in the wake of the Umayyad Empire gives rise to an entirely different phenomenon. The Umayyads develop cultural appetites as part of the process of creating a blossoming civilisation. What comes into view by the ninth century through conversion and urbanisation, especially, is the features of a properly open civilisation, the substance of which is only accidentally Islamic, to apply Marshal Hodgson's assertion, or at best, Islamic by association. The Abbasid effort to export a shared sense of Muslim cultural identity was not entirely in vain, despite the

great many local disparities that thrived beyond the capital, and on the borders of an increasingly segmented Empire. Unlike the Umayyads who were effectively cultural chauvinists invested heavily in the prosperity of the Arab and the proliferation of their own aristocratic lineage, the Abbasid vision was coloured by their ambition to be seen as the rightful inheritors of the Prophet. This is transparent in the proclamation of the *mihna* by al-Ma'mun in 827. The *mihna* was a period of inquisition instigated by the caliph al-Ma'mun (reigned 813–833) towards the end of his rule to propagate a religious monopoly in favour of the Mu'tazilite creed. The short-lived *mihna* of al-Ma'mum was a failed attempt at administering policy that secured centralised religious power with the caliph as the shadow of God on earth. By extension, and arguably so, it was specifically a shared Abbasid view to synchronise caliphal authority over both the domains of religion and politics. It was, in essence, an attempt to claim the status of the Prophet by proxy. Here the ulama were instrumental in the pushback on the implementation of this policy, a critical point that again highlights the power struggles defining the complexity of religion and state relations in Islamic polity. Had the *mihna* succeeded, the Muslim world would have been well on its way to establishing a papacy or patriarchate (Bulliet, 1994, p. 119).

Michael Walzer's study of Calvinism offers noticeable parallels with early Islamic ideology as a type of 'puritanical' force displaying an unrelenting resolve to transform the existing political and moral order on the basis of an ideology called 'Islam' (Walzer, 1982).[7] The aim of making a comparative observation between Calvinism and Islam here is not to invoke the vexed Weberian thesis wanting to explain the "rational absence of capitalism outside Europe" (Turner and Nasir, 2013, p. 23). Bryan Turner demonstrated that Weber's observation of the patrimonialism of later Islam explains only some Islamic developments, thereby having missed the real sociological issue about "the transition of Islam from monetary economy to an agricultural, military regime" (Turner and Nasir, 2013, p. 23). The fact that Muslim economy did not take a capitalist turn never really determined an absence of 'asceticism' in Islam, but retroactively underlines the want of a host of other key variables such as modes of ownership, free labour, rational law, and free-market movements that distinguish the modern West (Turner and Nasir, 2013, p. 25f). Applying Walzer's (1982) argument about Puritanism, Islamic 'puritanism' can be similarly perceived as the historical expression of the political theory of certain groups of Muslims or individuals seeking reform or wanting to create a new government or society in the face of the establishment.[8] Walzer's assertion about Islamic puritanism in the modern period is certainly accurate in seeing the 'Protestant Ethic' of Islam as derivative, since key figures of Islamic modernism were either European educated or accepted its traditions (Turner and Nasir, 2013, pp. 33–35). Yet, the motivations of Islamic puritanism or 'Pure Islam' – underpinned by prescribed asceticism, activism, and responsibility – are recurrent in Islamic history, and exemplified by a scriptural ethic that in practice sought to be free from non-essential accretions in its religion.[9] Whether pre-colonial or post-colonial, such activity, in the absence of a formal separation of 'church and state' and in the context of Islamic history, I argue, is the blurring

of the roles of 'religion' and 'politics', the distinction of which has historically existed in Muslim governance. The implication is that contrary to the Weberian comparative analysis of culture, the result of religion and state relations are very much context specific. The 'puritan' element in Christian Europe and the Muslim world, in this instance, has only a superficial connection to how each respective religion can be defined. In neither does the notion of puritan dominate as the absolute interpretation of the faith.

Within a civilisational context, and in spite of puritanical tendencies within Islam, most noticeable is the policy of the power elite that have historically maintained at least a de facto relation between the so-called religion and the state, and have done so by distinguishing between the domain of activity of 'religion' and 'politics' respectively. This is an important point in Islamic history that is often overlooked, but given significant attention in the historiography of Bulliet (Bulliet, 1994). The Muslim model for a separation of 'church and state' is explained historically as the organic development of power dynamics between a symbolic caliphate and the rise of the 'sultan' – literally, the holder of power (Bulliet, 1994, p. 7). But it can also be theoretically explained as arising from the conditions described by Hodgson, outlining a process of civilisational development that fashioned an alternative view to the original 'puritanical' force. Hodgson defined the 'civilisational' view, or using his terms, the "Islamicate" phenomenon, as the social and cultural complex or products of regions associated with Islam and Muslims, but which are not properly religious (Hodgson, 1974, p. 71f). These were inclusive of the social, cultural, and political, but also of the intellectual and spiritual products that set the conditions for state practice of an Islamic model of a separation of a so-called 'church and state' historically.

Religion and politics in Islamic history

The fact that from the tenth century onwards, there had existed a de facto separation of 'church and state' in Islam is obvious in observing the shift in power dynamic between the caliph and the sultan (Bulliet, 1994). Muslims distinguished the role of 'religion' and 'politics' in state governance, but never formally separated linkages. The sultans of the Ottoman empire espoused a similar manifesto in maintaining the role of secular and religious by-laws. The Islamic extremist ideologies of the twenty-first century, however, are resurfacings of the nineteenth century 'Wahhabi' twist, with a view to merge, blur, and conflate religion and politics (Al-Rasheed, 2002; Delong-Bas, 2004; Asfaruddin, 2007). The cycle of reformation and counter-reformation in Islamic history (the process of separating and merging religion and politics in state practice) underlines the utilisation of religion as a political tool; that is, people of influence using religion as a means to justify political ends. Hodgson's premise that the interpretation of Islam will invariably change across generations is a point to bear in mind, because it reinforces the view that Muslims (in their cultural variety) are active participators or agents of history, and not Islam in and of itself. In situating the role of religion and politics in their respective spheres, Muslims have, at least for 1100 years,

understood the integral need for separation, but also the significance of maintaining correspondences between religion and politics. This system of Muslim polity is likened to the western model for the separation of church and state, though not the same. The Muslim context of a similar observable practice was both informal and coincidental. It was politically defined by the shift in temporal power from the office of the caliph to the ruling 'sultan' (literally meaning 'power'), whereby the legitimacy of the caliphate was increasingly defined by religious affiliation than by political power (e.g. Bulliet, 1994, pp. 119, 122). In this sense, the function of the Abbasid caliph was limited to the religious domain, though officially coming to an end in 1258. However, the process of transformation was also importantly culturally defined as a civilisational development embodied by Muslim intellectual and artistic pursuits.

Contributing to the rise of Islam and its political empire were ideas located in older religio-political rivalries.[10] The historical narrative typically agreed upon presents the converted Arabs of the peninsula as people who formed a new political empire based on religion. Given the pre-Islamic Middle East was a region steeped in religion, what was unique about the rise of Islam was its revisionist spirit on the role of religion in political life. Prior to Islam, not only was every aspect of community life permeated by religion, but also those with political power controlled the livelihood of the populace. Yet, a key difference was that while the Sasanid and Byzantine empires used religion as an instrument for politics, religious authority was directly by the heavy hand of priestcraft. Zoroastrianism and Christianity were adopted as state religion in each domain respectively, and both exercised discrimination, and while their rivalry was to eventually have a long-lasting effect on the Arabs, the Arabs returned with a religion that undermined both the political and religious authority of its forebears. Prior to Islam, both empires made use of Arab chieftains to defend their frontiers. It is well known that the Sasanids subsidised Arabs of the Nestorian faith on their Euphrates frontier against invasion, and the Byzantines sponsored Arabs of the Monophysite faith along their Jordanian frontier. Still, it was not the converted Arabs that posed the ultimate threat in the form of a synthesis of religion and politics. Rather, it was the Arabs of the interior deserts, who had a fusion of animism and polytheism, who came into contact with the religio-political ideas of the Sasanid and Byzantine empires, and in the long run replaced them.[11] From this interaction emerged a new religion with its own political motivations, and one which was incredibly successful in holding its territory, even in the face of the rise of the colonial masters. Far from the stagnant and ossified phenomenon that Islam may sometimes be perceived as becoming from the fourteenth century onward, Islam is by and large successful in eschewing Christian dominance. Christianity continues to prosper, but it does so in geographical regions where there is not a majority or dominant Muslim presence.

The Sasanids and Byzantines each had the balance of power in the form of a ruling 'monarch' and a 'papal' figure, so to speak. In the prophetic career of Muhammad, however, the roles of the political ruler and the religious leader were combined. Starting as a preacher in his hometown, Muhammad's career was transformed with the hijra. The hijra marks the commencement of Muslim

political thought, because the emigration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE demonstrates a shift in focus from eschatology to governance. This process sees religious concerns fade into empire building, and although wars of succession led to sectarian division, they did not altogether undo the Islamic body politic. This is a critical point in Islamic history, because it is a return to former religio-political models as exercised by the pre-Islamic superpowers. Indeed, the flexibility of the structure of the Islamic polity maintained itself by emulation of non-Arab political systems. In the absence of their Prophet, Muslims were forced to adopt suitable means to manage religious and political affairs. From the ninth century onward, Muslims continued to demonstrate innovative approaches to the religion and politics dynamic by sanctioning the separation of political functions between heads of state, military, and administration from the function of religious dignitaries and scholars.

Although it might seem that religious and political significance is closely interwoven in Islamic history, it is, however, not blurred. In the thousand years of Islamic history, state-building and militarised expeditions are tied closely to the faith, but they have clearly played distinctive roles in Muslim historical consciousness. The evolution of Muhammad's prophetic career, as the prime example, is based on the necessary dialogue that exists between religion and politics, a point that is evident in examinations of the Qur'anic text and the "document of Medina" or Medina Constitution.[12] Clearly, both these redactions stipulate the corresponding role of religion and politics in the rise of a new political empire based on religion.

Whence the Islamic model for separation of 'church and state'

Religion plays an important part in shaping social, cultural, and political experiences, but it is also itself defined by each experience and the context in which it is found. Therefore, while religion contributes to political, economic, and cultural transformations, it is itself typically altered by the experience. This is to return to the earlier point made about an implicit 'civilisational intelligence' in the unfolding of Islamic history.

It is worth noting that the civilisational contribution to the faith tradition has brought about a cultural transformation that now offers a visible religious diversity within Islam. This variety is, today, overshadowed by ahistorical readings of Islam, as promulgated by the activism of revivalist movements and reform groups vying for a return to an alleged absolute monotheism of an 'authentic' Islam. In this case, a theoretical distinction is drawn between what has been described as 'civil religion' and 'political religion', and the way in which Islamic history distinguishes 'religiosity' and 'civility'. The use of these terms here differs significantly from the concepts coined in the modern era that define the process and activity of 'civil religion' and 'political religion'. Of course, these terms are more aptly suited to the history of European separation of church and state (the more complex relationship between religion and politics can be explored in the experiences of the UK and US). Islamic history readily offers up examples of the process of the

sacralisation of the secular. In this sense, societal and cultural values and ideas, as well as the activity of politics and engagement with it, are transformed into a sacred affair. In Islamic history, the distinction is made, but it is subtle and of a different kind. It is less about how the state might be seen as either coercing or replacing traditional religion through the sacralisation of societal or political ideas. In Islam, if and when either or both societal and political values and ideas are sacralised, this is done to enhance the efficacy of the Islamic faith, and not to coerce or replace it. In the Muslim world, religion has never been removed from the activities of societal and political life. Having had a complex but correlative relationship, religion has instead been domesticated and utilised as a tool for public and political governance in powerful ways. Quite apart from the American and French models of 'civil religion' (Bellah, 2005) and the Fascist model of 'political religion' (Gentile, 1996) in which there is a social and political force that emerges as a pseudo-religion, the Muslim model for separation of church and state, if we are to imagine it in this way, would be distinctly seen as recognising the practicality in separately administering political and religious affairs, but always maintaining the synaptic link. In fact, what the history of Islamic political thought conveys is a history of the development of a civilisational intelligence that is informed by active interpretations of traditional religion in the light of societal change.

The Muslim timeline is an expression not just of the progress of linear time, but of the emergence of a uniquely defined 'Islamic' religio-political method of the domestication of faith. This can emerge as either the extreme end of a traditionalist reading of the past or as the apathetic and disengaged expression of the modernist spectrum (see Figure 2.1, chapter two). The fluid historical movement of Muslim political thought has produced a variety of outcomes that have assessed and incorporated their distinction between religion and politics, as Muslim dynasts did, and as did radical oppositional groups, in its classical sense. Indeed, there is a significant shift in Islamic history that sees the robust eschatological rhetoric of the time of the Prophet being gradually overshadowed by increasing socio-political interests after his death. Still, religious significance and political significance are seen as distinct but complementary forces that shape Islamic history. After all, religious ideas have seeped into societal, cultural, and political domains and are transformed by these encounters. They also, in turn, affect transformations of their own in social, cultural, and political activity, which are particularly pronounced within the sphere of Muslim civilisation. What can be marked as the Muslim model of a church and state distinction is a unique religio-political 'intelligence' innate to Muslim civilisational development.

Civilisational aspects need to be understood as embedded contexts in (and through) which religion operates as a living tradition. These are social, cultural, and political realities in any given situation with which religion is inevitably engaged or in contact. The organic nature of the relationship dictates the push and pull; that is, whether religion is influencing or being influenced by one or more of these civilisational forces. In any case, the activity of religion can be traced in the way that religious doctrine is either put into social norms (e.g., as moral or ethical guidelines), becomes part of cultural norms (e.g., in the form of

rituals), or influences political standpoints (e.g., state policy). The fundamentals of religion can be defined simply enough with respect to the articles of faith and the pillars of the religion, as described by the faithful. This is not difficult. But in the present analysis it is more a question of the attitude, interpretation, and application of these elemental components that needs to be thought through. It becomes more an issue of how these attitudes are fostered and applied to daily life as a result of the way in which the religion is read, which raises the question about 'civilisational intelligence' already noted. This also concerns specific and unique Islamic religio-political 'intelligence' that is forged out of the special conditions of Islamic history.

Finally, in considering the idea of an Islamic model for the separation of 'church and state', the aim has been to demonstrate that Islamic history has, for the *longue durée*, sustained an organic understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. Yet it is one that has overwhelmingly been about the sacralisation of the secular. After the collapse of imperial Islam, modern Muslim states and those in diaspora are at pains in their application or rejection of the western secularisation project as presented in its varieties. Yet what is understood is that aggressive secularisation processes have stirred reactions from more puritanic quarters of Muslim consciousness in an equally potent project of re-sacralisation of the secularised.

In the special sense that Islamic political thought is to be understood as the emergence of a unique religio-political intelligence, Sufis or Sufi groups are inextricably linked to the operational mode of being religious and political simultaneously. In the case that some Sufis or Sufi groups withdraw from society, they are not, therefore, necessarily disaffected. They may be outside the remit of political power, but they are nevertheless in possession of authority. And in this sense alone they are endowed with a degree of autonomy from the state.

The 'civic monk'

The 'civic monk' is not a reference to Sufis but rather an observation of everyday Muslims. What it implies needs to be understood in the light of all that has been hitherto unpacked for the reader. This final segment will put into place the last piece of the puzzle that makes up the full picture of Islam's role in the political climate. The relevance of this section is to emphasise the study of Sufi political thought as independent from, but located within, the remit of Islamic political thought.

The traditional biography of Muhammad (*Sira*) (Guillaume, 1955) documents his contact with Christian ascetics and monks, as well as other obscure figures such as the mysterious men dressed in white (Guillaume, 1955, p. 72) and the enigmatic *hanif* (Guillaume, 1955, p. 98f). These occurrences are consistent throughout his early life prior to the commencement of the revelations. As a boy, during his stay with the Bedouin wet-nurse, two men dressed in white take hold of Muhammad in the middle of the desert and 'operate' on him, removing a black spot from his heart. Later, as an adolescent, under the care of his uncle, Abu Talib, Muhammad accompanies him on a trip to Syria where a Christian desert monk

identifies him as the Apostle of God (Guillaume, 1955, p. 79ff). Later still, as an adult, this time in charge of his wife's caravanserai, another Christian desert monk identifies Muhammad as none other than the Apostle of God (Lings, 1983, p. 34). Despite this, the institution of monasticism is forbidden in the Islamic tradition. Furthermore, for its strict austerities, it is also frowned upon. The reason for this is traced back to Muhammad's own injunction on the subject as narrated in Hadith (Sahih Muslim, no. 1402b; Sunan Abi Dawud, no. 1369) and noted in Revelation (e.g., Q 27:57). The example of The Prophet's counsel to a companion by the name of Uthman ibn Maz'un is commonly cited in relation to how piety is perceived in Islam. In the narration, Muhammad clearly distinguishes his own practice from being a renunciate, preferring moderation in religion to exaggeration. That is, Muhammad would say that "your wife has a right on you, your guest has a right on you, your self has a right on you", so one has to sleep, pray, occasionally keep fast, and marry (Dawud, no. 1369).

Of course, the *Sira* does describe Muhammad's pre-revelation habit of spending time in seclusion, alone in a cave, keeping abstinence and in meditation, despite being married and holding an occupation as a merchant. Muhammad's example prescribed a pious life, but a life of piety that did not conflict with worldly duties or, worse, reject the world. In keeping with the development of Islamic polity, no contradiction was to be found in being a servant of God and partaking in worldly activity. The emphasis on rejecting monasticism in Islam may very well be linked to seeing it as an 'un-Islamic' path, which leads to the separation of religion and politics, and of course church and state.

The Sufis, who initially would take up the ascetic's woollen garb and the renunciate's begging bowl (*kashkul*), do reflect the habit of Christian monastics and desert fathers in their practice of withdrawing from society, and some in becoming wandering dervishes. Yet in keeping with the *sunna* of Muhammad, Sufis would maintain strict austerities, keep monastic rules, and live amongst brethren in monastic-style sanctuaries known as the *khaniqah* (Sufi house), participating in all of this without being renunciates. Essentially, Islamic tradition does not have priesthood or a monastic tradition; there are no priests, monks, or nuns in Islam. As such, Sufism is a tradition that reflects monastic habits but is not monastic in the true sense, although many Sufi fraternities had strict monastic rules like the *khaniqah* of Abu Said Abol Khayr's (Nicholson, 1994). Still, they were not monastics.

The Sufi tradition, some argue, evolved out of the desire to imitate Christian monastic life (Andrae, c. 1987) yet it was crystallised within the boundaries of Muslim piety as defined by Muhammad. Independent of the Sufis, the general demeanour of Muslim life in society resembled that of a 'civic monk'. Though the religion of Islam is a comparatively easy religion to follow, when compared to ritualistic religions such as Zoroastrianism, traditional forms of Judaism and Christianity, or Buddhism and Hinduism, it has maintained perhaps the strictest code of socially religious behaviour out of all religions. Since there is historically an absence of monastic tradition in Islam, monastic ideals and habits have (arguably) crept into social religious behaviour that manifests in religious etiquette

(custom, dress, and diet). Muslims generally uphold, in principle, five pillars, that form the basis of an austere life if followed in full: belief in God's oneness, prayer (five times daily), almsgiving, fasting one month out of the year, and performing pilgrimage. Alcohol and other intoxicants, vulgar forms of entertainment, and gambling are forbidden, separation of the sexes in public is adhered to, and a strict dress code is often enforced. All of this applies to the everyday life of the Muslim, from waking to sleep. That is, such austerities are not merely limited to visits to Church, Temple, or Synagogue. So, whilst not committed to a life of seclusion and chastity, since Islam is devoid of priests, monks, or nuns, the semblance of conservative Muslim appearance and traditional Islamic society often seems as such, since both strict austerities in dress and practice are incumbent upon the Muslim.

Sufism provides instances to be examined with regard to the politics of being withdrawn from society, but not losing authority, of being without political power, yet being fully present in the lives of the populace. Political Sufism and Sufi political interventions will be the subject of closer investigation in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Credit is due to Professor Richard Bulliet (Columbia) who signalled this phrase as part of an important discussion of Islamic history (see Bulliet, 2012; Bulliet and Voll, 2011).
2 Bulliet offers an extensive and detailed discussion on the processes of legal injunction in the medieval Muslim world (1994, esp., pp. 58–65, 92, 95, 115–122).
3 On Hallaj's interpretation of Iblis or Satan, see the *Tawasin*, the "*Ta-sin al-azal wa'l-eltebas*" (Massignon, 1982a, p. 42).
4 See chapter two for discussion on Muslim typology.
5 For clarifications on the Weber theses, see Turner and Nasir (2013, pp. 23–35).
6 In *Islam: the view from the edge*, Bulliet (1994) elaborates on the development of historical narrative and its relationship to types of source materials. On the urban focus of Islam, see Watt (1953, 1956) and Von Grunebaum (1970).
7 On the case of comparative analysis between early Islam and early Calvinism, see Crone and Cook (1977).
8 On 'Muslim puritans' and 'puritanism' in Islamic history, see Platt (1985, pp. 169–186) and Vann (2011).
9 The example of the Kharijites is worth noting. The Kharijite-inspired Zanj Revolt of 869–883 is also a case in point. But more thoroughly, there are numerous examples of early Islamic history's influence on Muslims, who idealised doctrine, seeking to emulate past events that occurred in the period between 600 and 800 (see Silverstein, 2010, e.g., p. 117).
10 See discussion on this in Bulliet et al. (2015, p. 209).
11 For more on early pre-Islamic history and the rise of Islam, see Cook (2004).
12 On the Qur'an see, especially, Gerhard Böwering (2008, p. 70f). On the 'Constitution', see Guillaume (1955, pp. 231–233) and Amara (1989, pp. 291–294).

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5 Political Sufism and Sufi political interventions

Ibn Khaldun wrote:

> [i]n the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force. Therefore, caliphate and royal authority are united in (Islam), so that the person in charge can devote the available strength to both of them at the same time.
>
> (2015, p. 183)

Other religions, says the renowned Muslim historian, were devoid of a universal mission and thus they were exempt from waging warfare "save only for purposes of defence". In Islam, the recognised religious authority is simultaneously concerned with "power politics", since only in Islam is the authority figure "under obligation to gain power over other nations" (Khaldun, 2015, p. 183).

The above sheds light on the political reality of Islam, which remains the same to this day. Without recourse to apologetics it explains Islamism in the absence of Muslim (political) supremacy. However, it is important to provide a more nuanced formulation for 'political Islam' in the post-imperial age of Islamic history. In the newly formed political and economic world of the western superpowers, Muslim thinkers have had to redefine political and social activity in terms of reform and revivalism. Islamic political thought, therefore, covers a range of concerns including reclamation of former dominance and alternate modes of coexistence, adaptation, and growth. Whilst the essential obligatory mission of Islam remains the same as Ibn Khaldun described, the intellectual content of political Islam has in fact come to denote a great deal more. This is why it is important to utilise the periodic distinction demarcated by the imperial and non-imperial age of Islam rather than the more simplistic approach of trying to understand Islamic political thought within the western paradigms of colonialism, modernism, and globalisation.

Sufism is relevant to the political life of Muslim society, and always has been. Its successes, too, have depended on the precision with which Sufis and Sufi orders have affected social change and enforced political interventions. Sufism has contributed to both reform and revivalism, and so it makes for a difficult task to strictly delineate the motivation of Sufis and Sufi orders within the Islamic

political spectrum. I will provide a general outline followed by specifics with reference to case studies.

Political Sufism

I define the phrase 'political Sufism' in two ways. In the broadest sense, it covers the spontaneous role of Muslim agency in Islamic polity, that is, to underline the synaptic link between religion and politics in everyday Muslim life as hitherto outlined. In a narrow sense, political Sufism, like political Islam, denotes the use of religion, or in this case, mysticism, to shape the political system (Akbarzadeh, 2012). Yet it is the motivation of such activism that is important to understand, and it is Turner's premise of locating Islam in societal contexts, and as lived by real people, that best accommodates political Sufism as "the consequence of social frustrations, articulated around the social divisions of class and […] economic crisis […]" (Turner and Nasir, 2013, p. x). I will incorporate this rendering of political Islam as synonymous with political Sufism because it is distinct from 'Islamism' (militant Islam). Political Islam, and thus political Sufism, is not defined by militancy. Islamic fundamentalists, militants, and extremists can become politicised, but political Islam is not limited to either category. In this way, a chapter on political Sufism is not about violent strands in Sufism, but rather the involvement of Sufism in affairs of a political nature. Hence, to be a politically active Muslim (or Sufi) is not the same as being a radicalised extremist whose hardliner views about religion and politics are realised in acts of violence against civilians and the state. That is not political Islam; it is militant extremism.

The theoretical basis of political Islam, and so political Sufism, is broadly located in the larger recess of doctrinal rivalry. The main focus of the contention was centred on the question of just rule. The responses to this line of questioning by definition carried (either implicitly or explicitly) a certain interpretation of religion. Mystics had their own postulation, which pressed the ruler's dependence upon the counsel of Sufi leaders. In this, the Sufis were pitted against the *ulama* (exoteric scholars of religion), competing for a place in the political arena. Because the theoretical basis of political Islam is doctrinal, and because doctrine traditionally bolsters political interpretation, the conflict is intrinsically defined by the politics of knowledge. Muslim political thought is essentially borne out of two basic realisations about Islam: the universality of its faith and the creed of God's absolute oneness (*tawhid*). The variable factor amongst the emerging schools of thought was centred on the method and substance of its comprehension. The particular formulation of each group presented slight but significant alternations in the resulting position on doctrine, as well as its political application. This process takes place largely in the political climate of Baghdad, modern-day Iraq. Thus, the Sufi movement makes significant headway in defining its religio-political outlook in a context that is infused with socio-cultural changes taking place primarily in ninth-century West Asia primarily.

The hallmark of the Sufi mystic was the claim to have a direct vision of God, which was distinct from the earlier pious Muslim ascetic who underwent rigorous spiritual exercises for the sake of purity but made no such claim. The attraction to Sufism,

in this political context, was due to popular interest in the alternative it offered for newcomers to Islam who had a penchant for spirituality and mysticism. As such, the popular growth of Sufism is historically linked to the increasing rate of conversion to Islam and the process of urbanisation that followed in developing cities in Iran and Iraq, specifically Khurasan and Baghdad, from the ninth century onward. In the medieval Muslim world, Sufism was simply one more variation among numerous extraordinary claims for Islam. Yet it was an important variation that proved to be highly influential in the long run. The institutionalisation of Sufism was indicative of its success as an alternative experience. Also, facilitated by geographically extensive brotherhoods dedicated to the spiritual method of a particular local master, the Sufis were able to assert their influence in the politics of the day.

The politics of knowledge

At its height, Sufism was very much in vogue among the populace. The allure of poetic language accompanied by expressions of music and dance infused with the mystical ideas of the Sufis spread far and wide. Sufism would in the following years follow a fluctuating pattern of political patronage, but ultimately ceding pride of place to the influence of the newly emerging class of *ulama*.

The designation of *ulama* was initially generic, and could apply to any number of Muslim men (and sometimes women) educated in matters of religion. The emerging scholarly class (pl. *ulama*, henceforth, ulama), however, made for themselves a distinct social rank during the course of the third century of Islam. Given that Islamic tradition is officially devoid of priesthood, the ulama came to occupy that role. In the later years, under the prominence of Shi'a, the ulama (or in the Shi'a vernacular of Iran, *mullah*) in effect created a de facto class of clergy. Since the early Sunni ulama were not priests, their role was effectively secular and their religious authority was based on learning. As individual learned scholars of religion (sing. *alim*), those educated in the 'sciences of the faith' (*ulum al-din*) were not only specialists in the different 'sciences' such as law, Qur'anic commentary, and grammar, but some were also celebrated as pietists, ascetics, or even Sufis. But a particular pedigree of the learned were involved in the formalisation of learning (Islam), and by way of creating a rubric, they also produced a restricted framework for how to be 'properly' Islamic. Many of those ulama whose lineage was linked to the family of Muhammad gained an additional level of religious authority amongst their peers. These were identified as the *sayyids* or *sharifs*. Slightly less important, but yet of significant status, were others who validated themselves through links to one of the closest companions (*sahaba*).

It was during the first three centuries of Islam that the edges of Muslim society exploded with competing claims to religious authority (Bulliet, 1994, esp. ch. 5). This was a consequence of the slow absorption (and re-emergence) of native and local religio-cultural elements of the regions conquered by Muslims. To be sure, the regions of Iran and Iraq were already awash with religious groups prior to the arrival of Islam. In this robust religious atmosphere, the dominant missionary and communal religions such as Christianity (from the West) and Buddhism (from the

East) competed for converts. Zoroastrianism and Judaism were more or less 'sedentary' faiths, in a manner of speaking, as religions of the state or of a particular ethnic group. As such, the basis of Islamic teachings was hardly novel to the ears of the masses that had experienced hundreds of years of religious rivalry in the same vein. Yet the lure of Islam – in the early years at least – was no doubt in its egalitarianism and ritual simplicity (compared to, say, the highly ritualised world of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism). Of those religions that have an uncanny parallel with Islam, Manichaeism is perhaps the most peculiar. It was a widespread religion that lasted for a thousand years but is now extinct. Manichaeism was borne out of the teachings of a self-proclaimed prophet and apostle to God, Mani, who founded his own religion and scripture, and is alleged to have claimed himself to be the last prophet. The basis of Mani's religious teaching was centred on true knowledge of salvation, but its delivery was syncretistic in that Manichaeans would present their teaching to each religious community through the familiar language of piety. In the years following the establishment of Muslim authority, many religious currents thrived in what was a fertile religious environment induced by a volatile political climate. Pietists, ascetics, and even Sufis took many forms, but in addition to these there were also a numerous number of "would-be claimants to prophecy, secret groups inviting people to conspiracies, and many other calls to pious rebellion" (Bulliet, 1994, p. 106; see also Crone, 2012). The particular imagery given to us by Bulliet's historical imagination asks us to envisage a time when literally thousands of people were asking questions about Islam and "the marketplace of answers was wild and colorful" (Bulliet, 1994, p. 106).

It was, indeed, hardly surprising that out of this "marketplace of answers", knowledge was eventually the winner (Bulliet, 1994, p. 106). But this was not 'knowledge' of the esoteric kind, but rather scholastic knowledge, which in turn translated to exoteric renderings of general religious information. Knowledge in the deeper sense (*ma'rifa*) remained with the Sufis (as well as with the Shi'a imams), and with them secret teachings and their meaning were pushed further underground. Furthermore, it was a question of access to knowledge that was also at stake. Sufism was bound by initiation and subordination to a master, and Shi'ism largely to secrecy. Yet in the same period any member of the Muslim community could become an *alim*. Thus, the unfolding of religious development foreshadowed negligence of the core ingredient of piety in favour of a cursory learning of its scripture. The Sufis certainly could have eclipsed the ulama as leaders of religious authority, since their experience was both personal and direct. But the ulama secured the popular devotion of the majority by acting as a bridge not between man and God (as did the Sufis), but between the believers and their Prophet. Since the natural course of history is for the generation of devotees to be continually distanced by each passing decade from the religious point of origin (or the event of Muhammad's revelation), the ulama made themselves indispensable as the proprietors of religious knowledge. The ulama were successful in convincing the populace that they alone could credibly connect their fellow Muslims with what was fast becoming an idealised past. And they were, as Bulliet notes, rendered the heroes of Islamic history for it (Bulliet, 1994, p. 106). Not much has changed in regard to the general Muslim attitude toward their learned class,

except for countries like Iran where a theocratic government is in power, and where its populace is vexed by a mixed feeling towards its religious elite, the mullahs.

In any case, the Sufis were not altogether driven out of the picture of the story of Islam. They would return to legitimise their claim to power in subsequent centuries, though never fully ousting the permanent sway of the ulama. This is because the fundamental dynamics of success for the ulama was a recipe for the idealisation of the early Muslim community. This was partly through their control over the religious sciences, but mainly through the production of a new branch of 'science' centred on the Prophet's person and synonymous with the ulama's own efforts to dominate religious information about the past. The ulama were directly involved in the process of authenticating accounts attributed to Muhammad (*hadith*), and, by extension, divulging their mandate on Islamic doctrine and praxis. Since there literally existed an enormous body of such accounts (many circulated by Sufis as well), their 'canonisation' of a limited number of collections produced the body of texts collectively referred to as the Hadith. These were sayings or doings or reactions of the Prophet, which were believed to be authentic instruction (either directly communicated or by example) as heard or witnessed from a companion and then passed on. The chain of individuals that linked the most contemporary to its historical source was known as the *isnad*. The content that was conveyed was known as *matn*. The former was relied upon for authentication of the message, and the latter communicated its content. In later years, Sunnis and Shi'a (as well as Sufis) would render varying degrees of importance on one or the other. In the long run, the contribution of the ulama was, therefore, paramount to producing the layer of homogeneity of community and uniformity of religion that was necessary, as it was both desired and relied upon by the believers.

The crux of the politics of knowledge is focused not just on the historical point of fact that Muhammad was gone and Muslims had to come to terms with the physical absence of the Prophet, but that also phenomenologically how the presence of Prophetic experience was to be made manifest in the continuation of its history. The perpetuation of the Islamic experience through historical time is thus inextricably linked to these two interconnected realisations on behalf of the Muslim community. Given the range of Muslim agencies, regardless of doctrinal and legalistic affiliation, each would have to resolve the simultaneous presence and absence of Muhammad. In this, each would then be defined by their own understanding of the historical and phenomenological duality. As such, the Sufis championed the Prophet's own experience as key, whilst the ulama advocated the imitation of the Prophet. Either way, each had to explain the historical reality of Muhammad's physical absence as well as phenomenologically constitute the presence of the Prophetic experience in the continuation of history. In a manner of speaking, and within the context of Islamic history, ulama came to occupy the role of the 'priesthood', and Sufis, the 'monastics'.

Sufi political intervention

Sufism is a historical trend within the Islamic heritage that has its own unique culture of practice. At the same time, and particularly outside of Muslim countries,

Sufi practices and traditions have also been taken out of an Islamic context and reworked by non-Muslims. Sufism is thus a profusely divergent tradition with a variety of interpretations as to the function and identity of Sufis and Sufi orders. Indeed, in her analysis of Sufism in Islamic Southeast Asia, Howell (2014) claims that "it will be evident that there is not one Sufism rehabilitated for modern life, but many carryovers and partial appropriations, each of which seeks to shape a distinctive way of being properly, and richly, Islamic in the midst of modern life". The remainder of this chapter will examine the way contemporary Sufi orders have adapted to, and how they are practising their faith in, the global context.

Interpretations of Sufism are today quite mixed. Outside the Muslim world, Sufism is usually seen as a peaceful spiritual movement of mediation (Bendle, 2003), while on occasion it is rendered a covert Islamic fundamentalist infiltration scheme (Stenhouse, 2007). Popular understandings of Sufism are usually limited to the elegant dance of the dervishes of Konya and the poetry of Rumi. Within the Muslim world, Sufism has been mostly held suspect and in contempt by the state. At best, the Whirling Dervishes who belong to the Mevlevi Sufi order, inspired by the teachings of Rumi in the thirteenth century, serve as a tourist attraction and a consumer export of Turkey. If not officially banned in Muslim countries that have a fundamentalist Islamic government, Sufism is otherwise technically under 'house arrest', where the predominant interpretation of Islam is mainstream. In some instances, versions of Sufism, or what might be termed Sufi principles, are utilised as a means to an end in political mediation. This is certainly not political Sufism as I render it, nor is it Sufi political intervention.

The domination of 'Islam' in mainstream media has overshadowed the wider interest in the mystique of the orient and the appeal of popular Sufism. The West's 'new' obsession with Muslim activity, diasporic community, and migration has instead brought the 'terror' of Islam sharply into focus. In light of this, the study of Islam has been dominated by interest in themes such as radicalisation, Islamism, and the application of Shari'a (Ahdar and Aroney, 2010). The unfortunate turn of world events, powered by complex political and economic anxieties, has therefore ensured enormous funds have been poured into projects that allegedly help 'understand' Islam and Muslims. Notwithstanding the value in fostering tolerance with greater education, this approach has, in principle, missed a valuable point – two, to be exact.[1] One, that Bernard Lewis' widely accepted hypothesis of the decline of the Muslim world has probably played a significant role to obscure the image of Islam – also not helped by his claim about the unimaginativeness of the Muslim empires during the age of European discovery. The rub is that the 'West' has subscribed to the Salafi argument that there is a pure form of Islam against which the great diversity of the global Muslim community is tested. Two, although there were pockets of socio-economic decline in formerly prominent centres of the Muslim world during the early modern period, there was also an increase in conversion to Islam within the same time frame. In short, Europe may have been on the rise economically, but within many parts of the Muslim world Christianity was losing the conversion 'battle' to Islam. The question is not just why, but how? Whilst a major factor for the growth of Islam is fast-growing populations

(Pew Research Center, 2015), the religious factor has also played a significant role. Islam does not have a history of missionary activity; though, as already outlined, Sufism did fulfil this role to some extent. Regardless, as was the point of discussion in the previous chapter, Islam certainly surpassed other religions in being accessible and open to social and cultural diversity. Christian missions were vigilant in seeking converts, but they were also participants in the processes of othering. In many ways, the character of broad acceptance in Islam served to compete with Christianity's more aggressive missionary tack, but it was the activity of the Sufis and Sufi orders in their capacity to 'reach out' to the non-Muslim population of the empire that facilitated much of the conversion. Today, there are Islamic models of 'missions' (*da'wah*) and community programs that promote the religion to the general public and invite them to Islam, but the Sufis arguably remain the most effective medium of entry into Islam. But it is not due necessarily to Islam's wide appeal, but rather the mystique of Sufi spiritual culture.

Sufism's introduction to the modern West was in connection to Inayat Khan's Sufi Movement. Inayati Sufism quickly found support across three continents – America, the UK, and in Europe – during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Since then, the presence of Sufi orders and their membership had increased rapidly outside the Muslim world, whilst simultaneously contributing to the fortunes of Islam. The success of Sufism has been beneficial for Islam in that becoming Sufi is first and foremost an invitation to accept Islam, which has, by default, helped the faith spread to areas beyond the historical boundaries of the Muslim world. The impact of Sufi organisational networks is well documented (see, for example, Curry and Ohlander, 2012; Malik and Hinnells, 2006). These studies demonstrate that the orders are highly organised and socially complex, boasting a modest estimation of registered followers in the hundreds of thousands in the West alone.

The great appeal of Sufism is its emphasis on the interior facets of religion. Sufis are neither necessarily limited by the constraints of any particular sect (Sunni, Shi'a), nor do they strictly comply with Muslim legal schools of thought (*madhhab*). There is also the attraction to the charisma of the Sufi master. Yet it is the subtle process of Sufi conversion that needs to be emphasised, which stands in contrast to other forms of conversion processes such as the traditional 'summons' to Islam or the dialectics of classical Muslim 'theologians' such as the renowned Imam Ghazali (d. 1111). For certain, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews already grounded in strict asceticism and piety found themselves drawn to the "spiritual athletes of Islam" (Bulliet, 1994, p. 106), and, as newcomers, stumbled onto the Muslim faith through the maze of mystical Islam. The accounts of such interactions are immortalised in the stories of Muslim saints and mystics of Attar (Arberry, 1983). Here there are many dramatised portrayals of advocates from all other religions that are humbled into submission to Islam by the miraculous deeds (*karamat*) of the Sufi saints with whom they engaged. The Sufi process of gaining conversion for Islam is usually indirect, and often described as the heart of Islam. The topic of Sufism in the politics of conversion to – and retaining believers in – Islam will be discussed at length in the following two chapters. For now, it will

suffice to provide one such anecdotal account of an early Sufi saint, Ahmad ibn Harb (d. 849). Ahmad was a noted ascetic of Nishapur, and a recognised transmitter of *hadith*. He fought in the holy wars and visited and taught in Baghdad in the time of Ahmad ibn Hanbal. He died at the age of 85. The following account is of Ahmad and the Zoroastrian (Arberry, 1983, pp. 146–148).

It was recorded that Ahmad Harb had a Zoroastrian neighbour, whose name was Bahram, who had his trades goods stolen by thieves. Upon hearing this, Ahmad calls to his disciples to visit his neighbour and to console him for his loss, stating "Even though he is a Zoroastrian, yet he is a neighbour". Having reached Bahram's house, they saw that he was tending to the sacred fire of the Zoroastrians. Ahmad honoured his neighbour by kissing his sleeve, and Bahram provided Ahmad and his disciples with what bread he had left, inviting them to his table. Ahmad reassured him that they were not there to eat, but to sympathise because they had heard about the loss of his goods. Bahram confirmed this, but says:

> But I have three reasons to be grateful to God. First, because they stole from me and not from someone else. Second, that they took only a half. Third, that even if my worldly goods are gone, I still have my religion; and the world comes and goes.

Ahmad was pleased by his neighbour's words, and he instructed his disciples to write down what Bahram had said, noting "The odor of Islam issues from these words", to which he added turning to Bahram, "Why do you worship this fire?" Bahram replied "So that it may not burn me […]. Secondly, as today I have given it so much fuel, tomorrow it will not be untrue to me but will convey me to God".

"You have made a great mistake", commented Ahmad.

> Fire is weak and ignorant and faithless. All the calculations you have based on it are false. If a child pours a little water on it, it will go out. A thing so weak as that – how can it convey you to One so mighty? A thing that has not the strength to repel from itself a little earth – how can it convey you to God? Moreover, to prove it is ignorant: if you sprinkle musk and filth upon it, it will burn them both and not know that one is better than the other – that is why it makes no distinction between filth and frankincense. Again, it is now seventy years that you have been worshipping it, and I have never worshipped it; come, let us both put a hand in the fire, and you will see that it burns both our hands. It will not be true to you.

Ahmad's words had reached Bahram's heart, and prompted him to pose four questions in reply, saying that if Ahmad could answer each one he would accept Islam.

> Say: why did God create men? And having created them, why did He provide for them? Why does He cause them to die? And having caused them to die, why does He raise them up again?

Ahmad replied:

> He created them that they might be His servants. He provided for them that they might know Him to be the All-provider. He causes them to die that they may know His overwhelming Power. He makes them to live again that they may know Him to be Omnipotent and Omniscient.

Upon hearing his reply, Bahmad immediately recited the attestation of faith. "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that Mohammad is the Apostle of God". And instantly Ahmad cried aloud and fainted. When he recovered consciousness, his disciples asked, "Why did you faint?", and Ahmad answered:

> The moment that he raised his finger in attestation, a voice called to me in my inmost heart. "Ahmad", the voice said, "Bahram was a Zoroastrian for seventy years, but at last he believed. You have spent seventy years in the Faith; now at the end what will you have to offer?"

Sufi orders outside the Muslim world

The migration of Sufism to the 'West' in the modern period did not equate with cutting ties with place of origin, nor did the growth of initiates from a larger pool of non-Muslim population restrict Sufism to an isolated 'western' phenomenon. Connections with the Sufi homeland continued, and newcomers were not only made Muslims by default, but were brought into the fold and taught the peculiarities of Islamic culture vis-à-vis the 'brand' of Sufism to which they now subscribed. In effect, the expansion of Islam, through Sufism, outside the Muslim world was an exportation of the politics of Islam. That is to say, initiates to Sufism became conduits to Muslim diplomacy abroad. For instance, the rhetoric that Islam was not 'bad' but misunderstood became commonplace.

A major difficulty for non-Muslims has been a shortfall in discerning Islam in the face of both 'mysticism' and 'terrorism'. Ergo, the question: which are the 'real' Muslims? Sufis do, in principle, stand for non-violence, but Sufism is not docile. Its activities outline the same push for the prominence of Islam, but unlike Islamists, the prerogatives of faith are advanced with refined tact. The globalisation of Sufism through the establishment of Sufi networks in many geo-social centres of the world has changed the way that scholars examine the phenomenon of Sufism. Globalisation, however, is not to be confused with the unification of all Sufi orders. The Sufi orders have never been unified under one banner at any point in history. Sufi orders continue to retain their own networks of expansion across the globe, and they are independent of each other. The networks function from the dictums of a central authority, which is normally referred to as the master. What this means is that a study of Sufi activity in one geographical location will inevitably reflect correlations with activities elsewhere, as well as back in the homeland. Each study would invariably yield elements of interconnectivity between regions

in relation to the Sufi activity being examined. This is because each Sufi order is centralised, and mandates are sent across the network to all outposts who follow the same procedure, wherever they are. As such, any study that is conducted on the activities of a Sufi order outside of the Muslim world is in effect also a documentation of 'Sufi outreach' from within Asia where they are all sourced. A global history of Sufism therefore presents a case for religious trends outside of the Muslim world that is being shaped by a broader Islamic ethos. Commencing from the second decade of the twentieth century, the export of Sufism from Asia and its success in Europe, the UK, and America initially opened the way for the extension of Sufi networks on a global scale.

It would, therefore, be critical in a study of Sufi political thought to examine concurrent studies of Sufi activity outside the Muslim world as extensions of greater Asia, rather than independent examples of Sufism in the diaspora. Studies conducted abroad (Malik and Hinnells, 2006; Curry and Ohlander, 2012; Green, 2012) document the social and political impact of Sufi orders outside of the Muslim world, but, more importantly, they also categorically demonstrate the strong cultural ties that Sufi networks have with their homeland.

It is already known that Sufi orders play a role in social causation, in that they exercise power via suggestion and coercion through large followings (Malik and Hinnells, 2006). Instances of social causation and political intervention on behalf of Sufi orders are common and provide evidence that Sufi orders have achieved a significant degree of social mobilisation and are well-placed to potentially play a role in social causation. The growing presence of Sufi orders in the past thirty years provides the degree of power mobilisation that determines Sufi political intervention as an extension from regions in Asia. Sufi orders are historically noteworthy for their demonstrated ability to muster vast numbers of believers.

Charisma is one key instrument by which Sufi orders rally both communities and individuals, capitalising on the production of didactic works and hagiographies that enhance the experience of ritual gatherings. Not to be underestimated, these productions instigate transformation of the physical and mental landscape; they have been demonstrated to do so in the past (Curry and Ohlander, 2012), and are an occurrence today (Milani and Possamai, 2013). The enigmatic personas of the Sufi *pirs* (organisational figureheads) are at the heart of the Sufi socio-political networks. Their social and political reach demonstrates their ability to call on large numbers to build community, garner substantial funding, and enact strong development in their efforts to intervene in both the political and social arenas. Yet studies have also shown that the social impact of contemporary Sufi orders is dependent upon a number of factors. Better-organised and larger Sufi groups draw on a sense of community that helps them to provide the cultural experience they deliver. This strengthens the bond with place of origin, and invites outsiders to adopt a new cultural viewpoint. The process amounts to a slow but powerful transformation on a personal level, where someone who is, let us say, not Persian, gains a sense of belonging to that culture, its history, and is unwittingly weaved into its *mentalité*. Such is the charisma also of the cultural ethos of a time and place, even on foreign soil. Sometimes, to become Sufi, then, amounts to becoming 'Persian',

for example, just like it might be expected that to become Catholic or Orthodox is to become, in some sense, Italian, Greek, or Russian. This is simply to reaffirm the benign process of 'religious integration'. It does, however, underline one very important point about the fact that culturally integrated religion is in this sense seen as a social force that pulls to itself from the centre of its gravity everything that comes within reach.

A pilot study on Sufi orders

At present, major Sufi orders have ready-made social networks that can be organised in a variety of ways, both within and through Muslim communities. It is therefore important to distinguish between Sufi teachings and the social network in order to understand how different social actors are presently determining the development of Islam. It is precisely this which explains Sufism's involvement in shaping political discourse about the perception of Muslims in Asia and beyond.

An Australian study on two Sufi orders, one predominantly in Asia Minor and Central Asia and the other in West and South Asia, provided useful information on social engagement and political intervention on a local and global scale. The orders studied were contacted in Australia in a bid to investigate the presence of Sufism there and measure the impact of various groups across major urban centres in Australia (Milani and Possamai, 2013, 2015). The data from the Australian study was processed from fourteen in-depth and qualitative interviews, and generated new information about Sufi belief systems and the activities of the groups. From the study, researchers confirmed the long reach of Sufi networks from their homelands – an important finding was that Sufi culture was found to be thriving, supported by a substantial online presence. Although the orders in Australia were represented by a smaller number of followers than those abroad, this was relative to the size of the diasporic community in Australia. Sufis in Australia were noted to be working across a range of sectors, from both the upper and lower ends of the social ladder. Also, and not unsurprisingly, having been established in Australia for over twenty years, they have attracted a growing number of non-Muslim followers (Milani and Possamai, 2013). These were people attracted not only to the allure of mysticism, but, in particular, to the arcane qualities of oriental culture and language.

The study also confirmed that Sufi groups possess a double function both as a 'backdoor' for outsiders coming into to the larger Muslim community as well as a 'safety net' to avert de-conversion. Whilst all initiation rites are strictly private and known only to members, new members are first made converts to Islam, after which they pledge allegiance to the Sufi order (and its head). The directive of the spiritual head pervades the everyday life decisions of the pledgee. Yet there are varying degrees of involvement among aspirants. Some choose to formally join and commit to a specific order, while others choose to have an informal relationship, seeing the heads of Sufi orders as worthy spiritual guides rather than formal leaders. Others still join but maintain only intermittent contact with the group.

Further study on Sufism abroad

Although a study of Sufism in the Australian context, it was about much more than geographical specificity. The success of the study fed into receiving a small internal grant from Western Sydney University to conduct further research on Sufi political activity. This time, I endeavoured to gather data to confirm my suspicions about Sufi attitudes toward social engagement and political intervention. I interviewed leading members from three independent Sufi organisations, all distinguished: two from Pakistan and one from Iran. I was not surprised to find that the data matched the general findings of the pilot study, since I had already suspected that the Sufi orders were not limited by geo-specificity.

Furthermore, the new data confirmed my assertion that Sufis are reluctant to appear political, but are nevertheless engaged in social activity that is either directly or indirectly linked to political involvement. The interviewee from the Chishti order noted politics as a "numbers game" and alluded to Sufi involvement, but noted that Sufi political intervention is not always centralised or indeed coordinated. He emphasised the enormous support of the Chishti order from the populace, and that it therefore had an influential following.

The interviewee from the Nimatullahi Gunabadi order was very clear that politics is a dangerous game with which Sufis had in the past been directly engaged. This came at great cost and much persecution from the Shi'a clergy of Safavid and later periods who held Sufism in suspicion and as a threat. The interviewee, similar to the Chishti member, confirmed that there is no such thing as an organised movement or centralised power of political Sufism. Sufi masters generally wrote about politics in the spirit of advice or counsel on just rule, but that this was not necessarily meant as political intervention. The main theme of the conversation was about distance from politics, but the inevitable reality of the social and political nature of Sufism (as part and parcel of living a good Muslim life) which drew Sufis and Sufi orders into the orbit of politics.

The interviewee from the Naqshbandi Mujadeddi order placed a great deal of emphasis on the corruption of politics. This did not mean that politics was the source of corruption. Rather, it was the kind of 'politicians' that made politics what it seems today. The interviewee argued that the Prophet and his companions were all politically active, and were in fact 'politicians' in the sense that they were politically responsible. The interviewee openly advocated the need for Sufi political intervention, because the absence of Sufi political activity or keeping distance from politics equated with abandonment of the Muslim society. This is because Sufism was argued to be today an authentic example of Muslim piety and moral guidance. Yet interestingly, and in line with the other two interviewees, the 'reluctance' narrative emerged, cautioning against involvement in current politics. The interviewee insisted that Sufi political interventions were necessary, but that its activity was to be redefined by proximity. Should Sufis be involved in politics, it would compromise their piety and they would be at risk of corruption. They could not avoid politics, either. The answer remained a mid-way response, namely that Sufis must counsel and direct political activists and politicians without being involved.

Sufi political trajectory in the Muslim world and beyond

The diplomatic past of Sufism has a direct bearing on its part in the current political climate. Historically, Sufi orders have had a role as institutional innovators and conspirators (Bruinessen, 1998; Howell, 2001; Rozenhal, 2007; Hoffman, 1995; Heck, 2007; Van den Bos, 2002). In a recent study of the Sufi heritage of Iran, I (Milani, 2014) demonstrated the power of Sufi cultural capital to influence change and shape the religio-political climate. I also explained the often overlooked or difficult to perceive drive behind Sufi literature as evidence of political contestation. This power has traditionally resided with the heads of Sufi orders, which, through their charisma, patronage, and wealth, have since become significant stakeholders in political affairs across the Muslim world. Where the pivot of power rests with the Shi'a clergy in Iran, Sufi orders have retained a culture of resistance to the present day, often regulating their influence from outside of the Muslim world. This will be discussed in further detail and with reference to specific Sufi groups in later chapters. I will be examining one Sufi group in particular with reference to its institutional head living in exile yet exerting significant influence over followers in and around the Muslim world. In this example, history is witness to the power to influence religious interpretation and the ability to retain authority in the absence of political power.

The agility of Sufi groups is the driving force behind the changing shape of Sufism in the West and its success in contesting for converts through social and political activity (Bruinessen, 2009). Studies of the Sufi orders first gained relevance during the colonial period as a result of security concerns. It was during this period that scholars began to document the involvement of local orders with resistance movements in opposition to foreign control (Bruinessen, 1998, pp. 192–193, 199). This underscores something of the political weight of Sufi orders and the fact that since their emergence in the twelfth century, they have been strategic agents of political intervention. In the past, Sufi orders were professional organisations that had sizable influence over important sectors of Muslim society in countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Iran. The orders were extended through socially and ethnically integrated membership with far-reaching networks, underpinning the activities of the *tariqah* ('spiritual chain', 'path', or 'Sufi order'). Today, the orders still command a loyal following, often with direct links to local politics (Deasy, 2012; Phelps, 2014; MENA, 2013; Said, 2013). Many of these have international extensions with hubs in major metropolitan cities across the globe.

The Sufi engagement in social and political activity verifies their involvement in processes that has made them stakeholders in the power ratio among a number of contending groups. What follows are important ramifications in so far as disclosing the significant ways in which Sufism is currently interacting with society and politics, as well as offering projections of the future direction of Sufi orders as instigators of social change. Green's study maintains Sufis "as powerful and influential social actors rather than conscientious objectors acting from the margins of society" (2012, pp. 5–6). His findings present "Sufism as primarily a *tradition* of powerful knowledge, practices and persons" and that Sufism's social, political, and

cultural influence hinges on "discursive, miraculous and economic" power (2012, p. 6). Malik and Hinnells (2006) have established that Sufism plays a potentially pivotal role in the process of integration. Sufism is defined as a third social force that is an "innovative and ingenious interacting medium", with its various representatives seen "as oscillating actors between different social languages or consciousness's" (2006, p. 25). There is a potential in Sufism "when its members adopted the patterns of their host environment and hence became actors of both Islamisation as well as indigenisation" (2006, p. 25). It demonstrates that given the current situation of Muslim diaspora in late-modern western societies, "Sufism – intellectually and as well as sociologically – may therefore eventually become mainstream Islam itself due to its versatile potential, especially in the wake of what has been called the failure of political Islam world-wide" (Malik and Hinnells, 2006, p. 25). Malik and Hinnells' (2006) study concludes that Sufism "[…] seems to have the capacity to diversify Islam, as well as to operate in different public spheres and visibilities through its rich semiotics and symbol-systems, as well as its rituals, which appeal to a variety of social strata" (p. 25). Yet all of this is unmistakably a case of recurrence (Trompf, c. 1979). As frontiersmen and activists on the outskirts of Muslim civilisation, and as merchants and travelling saints across greater Asia, the present-day Sufi 'diaspora' is indicative of the same impulse to magnify the glory of God as Sufis understood it.

Sufi political intervention signals the efforts of groups amidst several processes: socio-political structural ties, diverse migrant Muslim population, and conversion to Islam among non-Muslims. Whilst there is a richly diverse population of Muslims across the globe today, the same diversity is represented among Sufi groups. The groups range from the most conservative to those who are avant-garde. The Sufi typology works within the same categorical parameters of Muslim typology (see chapter two), and demonstrates the gamut of mindsets that define each group. Therefore, different Sufi groups cater to different types of Muslims. Each is the product of religio-political climates of their place of origin, and each procures varying attitudes toward the state.

Generally speaking, since the Sufi heritage is seen as the 'inner' or 'hidden' dimension of Islam, its members and their practices are often indistinguishable from other members of the Muslim community to the non-Muslim observer. Sufi practices are distinguishable from those of Islamic orthopraxy, but not to the 'untrained eye'. As such, Sufis have generally enjoyed a degree of anonymity in moving through social circles, in particular, for their own safety against persecution from hardliner Muslims. This makes a traditional narrative history of Sufism a somewhat challenging task, but it underlines the pliability and power of Sufism to adapt itself to a foreign audience and non-Muslim culture. More importantly, Sufism has in the past acted as a religio-political conduit for Islamic and non-Islamic cultures, and this has an effect on Muslim and non-Muslim relations in the present. Yet this is different to the peaceful, 'cuddly', romantic impression of Sufism fostered by popular Sufi love poetry.[2] This twofold utility of Sufism features a *dual mobility* that demonstrates a capacity to influence and affect the geo-social spaces with which Sufism comes into contact. This occurs in two simultaneous ways: 'exporting Muslim culture' and 'importing non-Muslim culture'.

Since Sufism is a fully fledged mystical tradition, and thus has its own unique culture of practice, these practices and traditions have been known to be sometimes taken out of the Islamic context and reworked by non-Muslim initiates. An example of this can be found in the development of groups such as Universal Sufism (inspired by Hazrat Inayat Khan) and Sufism Reoriented (based on the teachings of Meher Baba). There is no doubt that Sufism is a profusely divergent tradition that has been suffused with a variety of interpretations as to the function and identity of Sufis and Sufi orders. There are, therefore, variations of attitudes emerging from different political cultures that function within a global political context. The power of change enacted through the activity of Sufi orders is, broadly speaking, nonthreatening. The ideology of Sufism is largely dictated by pacifistic tendencies and egalitarian policies. Though they garner wide-ranging influence, Sufi orders are mostly involved in community service. The communal sentiment extends to charitable works as well as extolling a philosophy of love. More importantly, the Sufi interpretation of Islam contradicts the Islamist, and is, in principle, incompatible with violent extremism. At worst, the insular varieties of Sufi groups may contend for a stricter observance of religion and the spiritual code of Islamic piety. They might lobby for greater awareness of the 'Islamic way', and they may be political, but their politics is a politics of Islam. Their focus would be on what they see as the correct interpretation of Islam and the legitimate figurehead whom they would recognise to lead them.

Sufi orders continue to cultivate a strong influence within local and migrant cultural milieus. They function as a conduit to Muslims and non-Muslims, in particular, as important hubs for social integration and cross-cultural dialogue. A related issue of concern is the transnational politics of migrant communities and political links to their homeland. It is important to appreciate the fact that Sufi orders are representative of both the import of Sufi heritage and connected ethnic origins, which can have varying, and sometimes unpredictable, ramifications. A significant portion of the socio-cultural histories of the orders carry over into the political debate about power and politics as pertaining to the reach of Sufism within and beyond Asia.

Notes

1 In the following, I explicate Bulliet's point, summarised by him in the following two public discussions (2008, 2012).
2 See chapter nine.

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6 A tale of two saviours

The Sufi contestation for power in medieval Islam

In this chapter I examine the role of Sufism within the broader power dynamic between Christianity and Islam. It would seem that the Sufi construction of Muhammad's spiritual identity, and the Sufi practice of what the late German Orientalist and Sufi scholar, Annemarie Schimmel, called 'Muhammad-mysticism', speaks to a longstanding dialogue between Christianity and Islam that also flows into the dynamics of their power relations in the medieval period. I review the available research, paying special attention to intellectual history, historiography, and Bourdieu's theory of spiritual capital, to explore the following hypothesis: was the construction of a 'Sufi Muhammad' motivated by the ideal of Jesus Christ in Christianity?

It is highly unlikely that Muhammad was a Sufi. In actual fact, it would be technically anachronous. What would be accurate to surmise is that he was idealised as the supreme mystic by the adherents of mystical Islam. The question that arises, however, is how much of the transformation of Islam's prophet into the Sufi par excellence was owed to external factors? This chapter, then, will be a critical reflection on the significance of the Sufi view of Muhammad, the founding figure of Islam, as defined in the context of competitive rivalry between Islam and Christianity in the medieval period. I do not advocate a theory about Sufism needing to borrow from Christianity. Rather, I argue that comparative elements between Sufi and Christian treatment of their respective founding figures hold parallels that are indicative of a deeper layer of a Muslim–Christian exchange dating back to the eighth-century practices of Muslim ascetics. The 'glue' that connects the otherwise coincidental parallels between Sufism and Christianity is the Sufi mystical view of Muhammad. I maintain that Sufism does not borrow, but develops a mystical treatment of Muhammad that is in direct competition with the treatment of Jesus in Christianity.

Sufis have been at the heart of the proliferation of the image of Muhammad, producing 'the Sufi Muhammad' based on Islam's founding figure. This in turn has a profound effect on the development of Muslim piety through their practice of 'Muhammad-mysticism'. Muhammad-mysticism refers to a development in Sufism that attributed the Prophet Muhammad with extraordinary features. Muslim belief holds that Muhammad is the most perfect of God's creatures. This view does not extend the Prophet divine status, though it does accord him a unique

place among ordinary humans. Yet, the Islamic reverence for its Prophet is notably similar in style to that of Jesus Christ in Christianity. Like Christ, in Islam, Muhammad is a model of piety and a champion of the poor. The Sufis relate that the essence of their mysticism was founded upon their practice of inward religion stemming from the inner meaning of the Qur'an and the inmost nature of the Prophet.

Muhammad is the source of the spiritual chain of authority (*silsilah*) for all Sufi orders. Sufis maintain that Muhammad is not only the most perfect prophet but also, more importantly, the most perfect saint (*wali*). Where the prophetic role of Muhammad ceased to exist upon his death, some Muslims have maintained that his saintly power (*wilayah*) remained unceasing and was diffused through key individuals in later generations, which retained the possibility of a genuine spiritual practice. It is true that Sufis and Shi'ites carry the view about an originating divine light or Muhammadan Light (*al-nur al-muḥammadi*) that is transmitted through the Sufi saints as well as the Shi'ite imams until the world's end. The Sufi view, however, is far less reticent with regard to the true nature of the Prophet. Unlike the Shi'ites, the Sufis attest to the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqiqat al-muḥammadiyyah*), disclosing a view about the hidden nature of Muhammad revealed only to God's chosen. This 'reality' was beside God's first creation and was manifested on earth in the form of the last of God's prophets. Additionally, and again notably similar to the Christian love of Christ, in Islamic mysticism the love of the Prophet is central, whereby invocation of the Prophet's names and attributes become vital to Sufi spirituality. While a distinct tradition surrounding the belief in the grace of the Prophet (*al-barakat al-muḥammadiyyah*) is made known in popular belief, it is intensified among Sufis for whom both the remembrance and saving grace of God is achieved with the help of the Prophet. Noticeably, the common Sufi self-identifier is *dervish* or *faqir*, signifying 'the [spiritually] poor'; a designator which is based on Muhammad's view about poverty as the pride of the pious, and which also reflects the practice of Jesus. Since in Sufism there is the tendency to experience first-hand the mystery of the Prophet, the Night Journey or Mi'raj has become the ideal of spiritual wayfaring in Islam. In this pursuit, the Sufis have gained a reputation as being among the most vigorous in their desire to emulate the Prophet as the perfect saint; from this, and in later Sufism, there emerges the notion of the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*).

I want to, therefore, extract Muhammad-mysticism from Sufi literary productions and to discuss the Sufi development of a mystical Muhammad – or Sufi Muhammad, as mentioned – through the lens of theory of power. The historical trajectory of this development is explained within the context of religio-political competitiveness. Power here is defined through Bourdieu's discussion of capital. The Sufi interpretation and legitimation of religious capital can be seen as a form of "benign control" (Layder, 2004) in that it demonstrates Sufis exercising power through the negotiation of religious meaning and symbolism. Granted there were a variety of ideas circulating in the medieval Muslim world that may have played a role in influencing Muslim thought – stemming from Greek, Persian, and Jewish traditions. Yet, the Sufi investment in a mystical biography of the Prophet signals

a more radical motivation behind its production. Constructing the view of their Prophet as the iconic mystic echoes an uncanny resemblance to the importance given to Jesus in Christian theology. The two are not only comparable but there is enough correlation between them to suggest Christian views about Jesus were a prevailing source of motivation in an atmosphere of rivalry.

Sufi literature suggests that miracles ascribed to Muhammad may well have been inspired by an effort to counter those attributed to Jesus (Ridgeon, 2001, p. 107). Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry (d. 1273), for instance, underlines the stringent view held by the mystics of Islam, in particular Rumi, about the superiority of Islamic faith over all others, and especially the heavy-handed criticism that Sufis like Rumi made of specific Christian doctrines and practices (cf. Ridgeon, 2001, p. 109). This reveals an important aspect of Sufi political thought: that the creation of Muhammad's spiritual biography was a way that socially powerful manifestations of Sufism carried out Muslim polemics.

Four-stage hypothesis of Sufi Muhammad

The rise of Islam as the new political power in the Near and Middle East meant the abolition of Sasanian rule and the withdrawal of Christian Byzantium from the region. Throughout the period of Muslim expansion, a host of religious traditions entered the orbit of Islam. While the stimulus of this contact with all of them, subtle or direct, can be said to be worthy of attention, it is Islam's exchange with Christianity that is particularly significant. Christianity, associated with a rival state, becomes the dominant and competing monotheism with a long tradition of symbolic and spiritual capital of its own. It might be said that neither Zoroastrianism, Judaism, nor Buddhism at this stage have the same competitive status as Christianity, either militarily or economically, with respect to Islam. Another reason for placing certain emphasis on Christianity in this exchange is the directional flow of the diffusion of ideas. Prior to Islam, Christianity maintains a dominant theology that infiltrates and spreads across Sasanid Persia and eastward into China. Even though Muslims would have come into contact with a variety of religious cultures, they would most certainly have encountered one version of Christian theology in their travels from West to East. It is into this debate that Islam also enters and with which it engages fiercely.

Four stages are here arbitrarily identified for sake of argument to outline possible stages of evolution of Muslim thought transitioning from asceticism to mysticism. Stage one, 700–800 CE, consists of the period of Muslim pietists, ascetics, and warriors. Here Muslim pietism is solely focused on God and no significant attention is given to Muhammad in a spiritual capacity (this is epitomised in the figure of Rabia al-Adawiyya, d. 801). Stage two, approximately 800–900 CE, sees the simultaneous rise of the proto-mystic and an interest in the inner nature of Muhammad. Stage three, 900–1100 CE, marks the blossoming of Sufi consciousness and with it the creation of Muhammad-mysticism. Stage four, 1100–1500 CE, marks the rise to power and dominance of organised and political Sufism in which the Pir or Sufi master becomes the source to emulate and, in

some radical extremist circles, worship. Following the process of development in these stages, a rough trajectory would be from God-consciousness (stage one) to Muhammad-consciousness (stage two and three) to Pir-consciousness (stage four). Whilst it is nearly impossible to demonstrate empirically, as there is simply a lack of definite supporting evidence that allow us to determine a direct link, an indirect link can be inferred through stage one that Muslim ascetics are directly exposed to first-hand exchanges with Christian ascetics about the nature of faith and knowledge of God. Thereby the sudden emergence of interest in the 'Muhammadan' nature in stage two and its development in stage three is not so unusual or unexpected. These two middle stages would then mark the high point of Sufi brokering for power with Christianity. Stage four outlines the natural progression of the evolution of Islamic mystical thought having established its supremacy over Christian spirituality, when it demonstrates the refinement of its own institutions as against internal disputes with Sunni and Shi'a imams, for example. In stage four, God and Muhammad have their place of privilege in Sufi thought, but the new crown jewel of Sufism is the cult of the master as a foil against the rising internal rivalries such as the emerging class of the ulama.

The issue raised here is that it is not about a point of origin but, rather, a point of concern for those Muslims wanting to test the expanse of their faith tradition against that of others. It is theological in nature but one that is politically charged because Muhammad is presented by Sufis as a figure comparable to Jesus. This is a power relationship that results in Sufis gaining the necessary capital to legitimate their spiritual status. The Sufis develop a tradition about Muhammad that supersedes the Christian Jesus. In this context, Sufis take the role of political powerbrokers for Islam. The logic is that the Sufi achievement fulfils a need that was previously not met within the Islamic tradition (cf., Schimmel, 1985), and that Islam is invested with a more credible response to its rival Christianity by having been infused by a Sufi innovation with the founding figure at its centre.

Sufism was a rising social force with tremendous reach and influence during this time. The Sufi brotherhoods were particularly distinctive after 1258 CE and Sufism was flourishing by 1500 CE, whereby most adult males belonged at least to one Sufi brotherhood. This explains the rapidity with which this movement rises – roughly 250 years pass and Sufism is the dominant form of active piety for most people, even though it is deployed in a variety of flavours (cf., Bulliet, 1994, p. 91). Since Sufis re-write their history to include the ascetics and pietists of the early Muslim period (Bulliet, 1994, p. 91), Muhammad is appropriated into this stream of historical consciousness as the best of the Sufis, and is transformed into the supreme example and essence of Sufism.

Muslim ascetics and early Sufis

The historical writings of the Sufis reveal an attempt to establish the earlier ascetics as their own forebears, and that this search for antecedents is indicative of the Sufi quest for legitimacy (Green, 2012, p. 23; citing Cooperson, 2000; see also Bulliet, 1994, p. 91). As such, the ascetics and later Sufis are better described as

competitors whose relationship is constructed retroactively by the Sufi biographers to present the former as their forebears or mystics-in-waiting (cf., Green, 2012, pp. 20–21).

The *zuhhad* were ascetic-warriors, who lived in frontier regions of the empire, wherein Muslims were the minority group presiding over a majority non-Muslim population (Bonner, 1996). Engaged as they were within a culture of exchange, it is quite likely that some ascetic-warriors did engage in extended periods of discourse in addition to combatting their Christian counterparts across the border. This is important not only because it indicates a certain degree of exposure and exchange in terms of religious narrative and practice, but it also suggests a measure of 'inheritance' for the Sufis. This process is perhaps best summed up historically in the Sufi achievement of the socialisation of asceticism (Green, 2012, p. 43; see also Bulliet, 1994, pp. 90–91). This early exchange, however, cannot be reduced simply to Muslims borrowing from Christians, but rather being a product of "a shared cultural arena and geographical area in which Muslims and Christians competed with one another within a set of overlapping frameworks, whether narrative, moral or metaphysical" (Green, 2012, p. 23).

It is not until the mid-ninth century, however, that the first references to Muhammad as "primal man and archetypal mystic" (Böwering, 1980, p. 264) can be found. In fact, Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) yields the first written source that speaks about Muhammad in reference to the light of God. This is a carefully distilled commentary that espouses not emanation theory, but rather absorption and representation of the light of God (Böwering, 1980, p. 264). Böwering admits that while Tustari provides an original synthesis based on his own mystical experience and interpretation of the Qur'an, this is also partially inspired by the "cultural matrix of his time", signifying possible "trends of neoplatonic philosophy, gnostic speculation and patristic theology" (1980, p. 265). Still, given the wider possibility of influence, Sufism emerges in its own right as an independent tradition with its own culture and outlook (Nwyia, 1970). The fact that there may be competing strands of influence at play does not determine that all influences must play an equal role. Even though Böwering objects to the Christian tradition as a principal source for Muslim exegetical innovations, the question of a causal relation between Christian and Muslim traditions is ignored in his analysis (Knysh, 2010, p. 123). Böwering's technical objections are noted, but they do not preclude what appears to be an unavoidable exchange between the two faiths. He admits there are striking similarities (1980, pp. 135–142). Sufis did not lack creativity in formulating their own exegetical tradition, and though they are not here taken to depend solely on Christianity as an influence, the exchange between the two cannot be ignored.

Sufi 'spiritual capital' and the field of power

Bourdieu's theory of practice is here applied to theoretically analyse Islamic mysticism in order to explain social and political motivations that underpin the construction of the idea of the Sufi veneration of Muhammad. Moreover, Bourdieu's

theory can help us understand conscious attempts on the part of spiritualist Muslims to build a formidable repertoire of 'spiritual capital'.

The question of social motivation is important for understanding the role of Muhammad in the mystical tradition (Bourdieu, 1971). The social motivation would have been already grounded in a thriving competitive interactive dialogue between Christians and Muslims from early on. To understand this motivation, it is important to explain perceived status and power (class). Bourdieu explains social status through a tripartite mechanism: habitus, field, and capital – an approach that distances him from the materialism of the early fathers of sociology. While Bourdieu shared similar concerns for wanting to understand class struggle and how externalised social aspects became internalised components of the social self, he differed in one important way: he wanted to demonstrate the mutability and complex relations between social agents who compete for power within the social arena. Bourdieu distinguished his findings by refining 'capital' in several ways, two of which are important here: *economic capital* and *symbolic capital*. The former defined 'mercantile exchange', while the latter included sub-types that presumed an essential value: cultural, linguistic, scientific, and literary capital (Grenfell, 2008, p. 103). The application of the latter in social and political contexts also set the grounds for another concept developed in Bourdieu's work: 'symbolic violence'. This is crucial in understanding Christian–Muslim relations in the Middle Ages, since the two groups were immediately distinguished by their socio-economic status (for example, the non-Muslim paid the religious tax (*jizya*)). They were also distinguished by their degree of symbolic capital. In this, the Christian cultures of the Levant were markedly 'richer' than their newly instated Muslim masters. Having gained tremendous economic wealth through the initial conquest of foreign territories, the Muslim rulers gradually turned their attention to obtaining forms of symbolic capital – the importance of which they understood, since the grand caliphs after the *al-rashidun* fervently pursued the arts and sciences.[1]

In time, Arab language, literature, and science (seeking of knowledge) became an example of sophistication, thus bringing with it prestige and dominance to the Islamic religion during what is reflected upon as the 'the Islamic Golden Age' (c. 750–c. 1258) (Lapidus, 2014, pp. 99–102). The Sufi appropriation of the person of the Prophet into their mystical tradition indicates a direct and specific example of how Muslims, in this case Sufis, were motivated to acquire their own measure of 'capital'. This arguably speaks about 'spiritual capital', since the discursive nature of the Christian–Muslim encounter in the conquered territories was, in an important way, defined doctrinally.

This is to adapt Bourdieu's theory of capital to illustrate the 'symbolic capital' category as including 'religious' or 'spiritual' elements, hence 'spiritual capital'. In other words, the Sufi contribution added to the overall richness and diversity of desired symbolic capital. In this way, 'spiritual capital' acknowledges the motivational component in Sufi politics at play in the social climate of the Middle Ages. The crucial question then is whether the Sufi Muhammad was a way to offset the extraordinariness of Jesus, even in the Qur'an, which, it can be argued, overshadowed Muhammad's ordinariness in comparison.

Annemarie Schimmel seemed to have noted a similar happenstance, and alludes to the unusualness of the gradual development of Muhammad's mystical persona in Sufi thought (Schimmel, 1985). Nowhere does she disclose the motivation for this process outright, but the process itself, that is, of the construction of Muhammad's mystical biography, is certainly transparent in her research (Schimmel, 1985). An important part of this undertaking will, therefore, be to extract key elements of the process within Schimmel's work that deal with the production of Muhammad-mysticism – since she has provided one of the most comprehensive studies of both Sufism and Muhammad – and then to add to this a dimension of relevant social and political discourse. To locate the activity of Sufism within the social and political sphere, the motivation for power in the sense used by Bourdieu as 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) becomes an important theme. Through Bourdieu, it is argued that a primary aim of Sufi activity in the formative years would have been simply to secure the superiority of the Islamic Prophet and to elevate his status above that of Jesus. Such a process was not necessarily undertaken out of any sense of insecurity, since this was a time of Muslim power, but rather as a way of maintaining status. This process, therefore, can be defined by the way in which Sufis capitalised on the existing adoration of the person of Muhammad as support for their aim to magnify the status of the Prophet through a mystical lens.

Muslim polemics toward Christianity

H.A.R. Gibb stated: "For at all times and in all countries the ascetics and Sufis were the most active propagandists of Islam" (Gibb, 1975, p. 91). The Sufis promoted a spiritualised version of Islam that characterised their more liberal or "inclusivist" appeal (Ridgeon, 2001, p. 120). Yet, more salient is that the Sufis were Muslims first, and held that "the Islamic form of religion was superior to that of others because the comprehensive nature of Islam extends into all spheres of life as a communal religion" (Ridgeon, 2001, p. 120). Muhammad was the mystic *par excellence* for the Sufis. Sufis believed Muhammad superior, and openly admitted that Jesus was yet to achieve the 'Muhammadan' stage of mystical perfection (Schimmel, 1985; Ridgeon, 2001, p. 107). For the Sufis, Muhammad was endowed with a cosmic significance, and so they portrayed him as the animating principle of all creation (Cragg, 1984, p. 60).

Malise Ruthven noted that in the past, Islamic attitude towards Christianity had been as diverse as western attitudes toward Islam today, ranging from outright rejection to inclusivist accommodation (Ruthven, 2001, p. xi). However, the general air of tension between the two faiths, as it manifests in various geographical locations in the contemporary world, is somewhat a continuation of the social and political competitiveness that defined their earliest contact (Goddard, 2001, p. 243). Hugh Goddard explains that mediaeval Muslim society was not free from adverse sentiments and agitation toward Christianity, whereby "Christians could serve as a convenient scapegoat for feelings of resentment in society" (Goddard, 1996, p. 34). This much is appreciated, since after the conquests the newly captured territories became an ideological 'battleground' where the two

faiths exchanged doctrinal blows. Muslims, who were victorious in military battle, were inclined to demonstrate how their success was rooted in their faith, and how this faith was superior to that of their rivals'. To be sure, the Christian–Muslim conflict had a distinct political edge to it, which was spurred on by existing anti-Byzantine sentiment. Certain aspects of Christianity, such as the cross, were viewed as directly representative of the 'enemy' and were targeted because they were an ideological symbol of the Byzantine Empire. Sufis, like all Muslims of the era, were equally affected by the broader political *habitus* of Muslim polemics, and Muslim writers of this period used their available knowledge of Christianity to enact a systematic criticism of its doctrinal position (Goddard, 1996, p. 26). However, the crucial point is that such criticism was never aimed at the person of Jesus, who was always treated with respect, and who had a special place of importance in Islam, but rather toward Christianity. More generally, Muslim polemics, that is, the suspicion and even rejection of Christianity, "grew out of increasing Islamic assertiveness in a situation of some competition between different religious communities and of the need to preserve a separate Islamic identity" (Goddard, 1996, p. 26).

There is a consistency, then, in the way in which Sufism would be seen to 'defend' the inner core of Islamic piety. Under Bourdieu's terms of thought, the social activity of Sufism can be observed as an inter-dependent, semi-autonomous, self-contained sub-field of the broader Islamic 'field' (cf., Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 5–7; cited in Grenfell, 2008, p. 70). Within the context of the Christian–Muslim encounter of the Middle Ages, Sufism has been defined in relation to, and located within, a period of Muslim power and dominance. As such, whether in the past or the present, Sufism needs to be seen as playing an important political role in this 'field', bolstering the Islamic worldview. The activity of Sufism in the context of Bourdieu's 'field theory' can also be thought of as a socially erected 'force-field' that safeguards those who belong to the Sufi 'sub-field' against the intrusive gaze of orthodoxy. Here, insiders remain largely undetectable to the outside in that they can operate within the framework of the Muslim point of view without having to self-identify as Sufi to their (non-Sufi) Muslim companions.[2] The analogy serves to demonstrate a number of important points about Sufism. First, the difficulty in distinguishing 'Sufis' among Muslims; second, the Sufi remains unseen by the outsider (either Muslim (uninitiated) or Christian); and third, Sufism is a third force in the social field of Christian–Muslim encounter, capable of facilitating change from within, but without compromising the integrity of its own faith tradition. Seen in this way, Sufism can be argued to maintain a special political façade that remains largely illusive, yet potentially constructive.

Yet, no matter how much the Sufis may have been inspired by the Christian image of Jesus in their encounter, their production of Muhammad's mystical persona was squarely placed within the Islamic domain. This is what Bourdieu refers to as *doxa*, which is understood as predispositions about which social agents remain unaware. In other words, we can use this example about social agents' habitual characteristics to highlight the gravity of 'Muslim *habitus*'. Herein lies the paradox of the Sufi production of Muhammad-mysticism – a neat convergence

of the humanity of Muhammad and the divinity of Jesus in the Sufi Muhammad. Muhammad is traditionally deemed to have achieved three important outcomes during his earthly ministry. He was, first and foremost, the renewer of sacred law, and thus the bringer of justice; he was a monument of inward reflection, whose soul was perfected through prayer and proximity with God; and most importantly, he was representative of his community as chief and facilitator of its faith. Still, what establishes Muhammad's unequivocal superiority to Jesus (or any other biblical prophet) for Muslims is the fact of his duty as a guide for the community and a perceived worldly leader of humankind (Ridgeon, 2001, p. 109). It is out of the familiar persona of the Prophet that the Sufis gradually forged the "Islamic logos, created by God before time as a perfect spiritual existent containing all things within him […] the so-called Muhammadan Light" (Ridgeon, 2001, p. 108). The Sufi innovation might have been based on religious insecurity but it was also a spiritual bolstering of the Islamic faith.

Schimmel's assessment of Muhammad-mysticism

Schimmel speculated the need for the Muslim to venerate Muhammad was located in the tendency of Sufism to search for the inner meaning of the religion. She was right. The practice of Muhammad-mysticism, by Schimmel's reckonings, was a response to spiritually fulfil an experience absent in orthodoxy: "the encounter with a personal God who is at once Creator, Sustainer, and Judge" (Schimmel, 1985, p. 143). Her point is well reflected in the doctrinally competitive nature of Christian–Muslim relations in the medieval period. South Asian Sufi poetry is among the richest in expression of divine longing. One of Schimmel's noted poets of that region was the Bengali Sufi, Muhammad Imanul Haq, who wrote: "This is the light of God (*ḥaqq*), which became embodied in the Prophet's person" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 49). Such an impression about the sacredness of Muhammad was already tucked away within the Qur'an, but the trigger was more than likely found in more obvious examples – and one that was readily available to Muslims was Christianity.

The Qur'an legitimates the centrality of the Prophet's personality in Islamic thought. Two passages in particular stipulate that Muhammad was sent as a "mercy for the worlds", *raḥmatan lil'alamin* (21:107), and "He who obeys the Messenger, obeys God" (4:80). In these citations alone, one can argue, are contained the seeds for the later emerging traditions about the imitation of the Prophet and popular beliefs about his life and actions. But the peak of the custom of venerating the Prophet is to be found in the Sufi interpretation of Muhammad. It was traditionally incumbent upon the faithful to imitate every detail of Muhammad's livelihood, and practising Muslims to this day possess a certain fixation on the outward details of Muhammad's life: how he dressed, performed ablution, and prayed, and even what kind of foods he preferred (Schimmel, 1975, p. 213).

This need to express the lofty qualities of the Prophet, and thus to practice *imitatio Muhammadi*, inspired the introduction of legendary lore into the Prophet's biography, which reinforced the sacred role of Muhammad within the Islamic

religion (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 213–214). Schimmel noted that the actual problem was that Muhammad, himself, rejected the personality cult and only ever claimed one miracle – that of transmitting the Qur'an. Yet, despite the Prophet's admonition, the Islamic tradition has produced an impressive collection of miracles that adorned his personality. In her seminal study about the veneration of the Prophet in Islamic piety, Schimmel (1985) discerned that Muhammad's personality became the agency of religious experience, and an integral aspect of the faith and practice of Islam. Schimmel cited the dual aspect of the *Shahadah – there is no deity but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God* (Schimmel, 1985, p. 3). As for popular praise, such traditions can be seen in the writings of the modernist intellectual, Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). As an internationally respected Iqbalist, Schimmel revealed in the life and poetry of Iqbal an all-important window into the popular praise for Muhammad within Islamic thought. Iqbal's poetry presents a unique love of the Prophet: "You can deny God, but you cannot deny the Prophet" (Iqbal, 1932, p. 608; cited in Schimmel, 1975, p. 227). Schimmel too was compelled to admit that "[i]t is Muhammad who makes Islam a distinct religion […]" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 227). More importantly, she believed that the sacred role of Muhammad in the worship of the average Muslim was the "contribution of Sufism to Muslim life" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 227). It seems, at least in Schimmel's reckoning, that mystical influence on popular Islamic traditions was something working from within and through the Islamic faith.

A key point I want to make about the production of the Sufi Muhammad is that it was both a practice and an idea completely invisible in pre-ninth-century Islam. Before this time the Islamic worldview was likely framed by the edict of Abu Bakr, which drew support from *sura* 3:144: "if any among you used to worship Muhammad, then Muhammad is dead; but if any among you used to worship God, then God is alive and shall never die" (al-Bukhari, bk. 5, no. 59:732). Schimmel had also noticed a significant change in religious attitude, which was initially devoid of a special praise of Muhammad, towards a mystical view of him. She underlines the process of transition in two ways: first by citing those stories about who conversed with the Prophet in dreams (Schimmel, 1975, p. 214; cf., w, 1983, pp. 237–239, 273), and second by citing poetic verses that elevate the Prophet to mystical heights. One story from the *Tadhkirat al-Auliya* reports on a famous mystic's dream in which the Prophet asks, "'Do you love me?' I said: 'Forgive me, but the love of God has kept me busy from loving thee'. He said, 'Whosoever loves God loves me'" (Arberry, 1983, p. 297).

Another verse from the same text states: "The origin of the soul is the absolute light, nothing else; that means it was the light of Muhammad, nothing else" (Fisal, 1959, p. 358; quoted by Schimmel, 1975, p. 215). By the colonial period, the Indian Naqshbandi Sufi, Mishkin Shah, presents the height of this sort of veneration of the Prophet in verse: "If there were not Muhammad, nobody would be; And the two worlds would not have existed" (cited in Schimmel, 1985, p. 132). What these literary sources indicate is that by the twelfth century the personality of the Prophet was firmly a part of mystical discourse and practice, and that it

acted as a platform for establishing attributions to the Prophet as the 'Muhammadan Light' and 'Perfect Man' in future Sufi discourse.

The Sufis were directly involved in shaping the biography of Muhammad and in producing the vision of a flawless mystic *par excellence*. Mansur al-Ḥallaj (d. 922) is a good example of those Sufis directly engaged in this process because his mysticism was incredibly penetrative, and because his Sufism was directly aimed at social reform (e.g., Massignon, 1994, pp. 15–16). As Massignon explains, so meticulous was he in his social and political activity that he forced the hand of his assailants to his own execution and death (Massignon, 1994, p. 16; Mason, 1999, pp. 67, 73–74; Massignon, 1994, p. 17; Ernst, 1985, p. 69). The poetry of al-Ḥallaj displays verses that openly glorify Muhammad as the 'mystical perfection'. The *Kitab aṭ-ṭawasin* reveals his vision of Muhammad as the cause and goal of creation – a Jesus-styled *alpha* and *omega* (Rev. 22:13). There is something interesting happening in the experience of al-Ḥallaj that certainly calls for pause – specifically, his view that Muhammad transcends Jesus in every way; the former is recognised by him as but "before 'before' and after 'after'" since his "substance is altogether light […]" (Gibb, 1975, p. 89; Cragg, 1984, p. 54; Massignon, 1974, p. 21).

Many such sayings envisage Muhammad as a cosmic entity: *laulaka ma khalaqtu'l aflaka*, "had it not been (but for you), I would not have created the heavens" (Hadith Qudsi; cited in Schimmel, 1975, p. 215). Verses like this are central to the mystical idea that the creation of the world was dependent upon God's love for the Prophet. It has a remarkable parallel with 1 John 4:8 (further in 1 John 4:16–17), "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love". Furthermore, the Sufis' 'mystical Muhammad' was made to confess that he was the first creation of God and that he "was a prophet when Adam was still between clay and water" (quoted by Schimmel, 1975, p. 215). The sacred hadith: *ana Aḥmad bila mim*, "I am Aḥmad (Muhammad) without the letter *m*", in particular, highlights the proclivity of the Sufi imagination (quoted by Schimmel, 1975, p. 225). The idea was simple: Muhammad was the medium through which God becomes conscious of Himself in creation. That is, God declares through the lips of Muhammad that He is *Aḥ[m]ad*, 'One' (again, note parallel with John 14:9: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father […]") (cf., Schimmel, 1985, p. 117). Further allusions to the Christian Jesus can be observed in that Muhammad was credited by the Sufis to possess the breath of "the Creator's purpose", which was already incarnate in him, and through "whom the human essence finds perfected form" (Cragg, 1984, p. 60). One such annotation by Schimmel was that within Muhammad was embedded, as with Christ, the divine Names and attributes; however, he was given the highest honour by the mystic as being the *nur Muhammadi* or the 'Muhammadan light' (Schimmel, 1985, p. 123). Muhammad was deemed the source of existence and through whom the light of life derived. The very reality of this 'cosmic' Muhammad was deemed by the mystic Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896) as the first of three emanations from God. More than just God's *wali* (friend), it was said: "When He wanted to create Muhammad He showed a light from His light which illuminated the whole kingdom" (Schimmel, 1985, p. 215; citing Vadet, 1962, p. 33; see, especially, Böwering, 1980, p. 264).

There was no doubt for Schimmel that to experience Muhammad as the light of God and the simple act of loving him daily had become the core of being Muslim by the time of the Sufis. Yet, the Sufi imagination was also infused by the humility of the Prophet as the 'servant' – a double meaning to signify the highest possible degree of a human being as a lowly mortal, but "who, however, is able to speak to God without being extinguished" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 220). If a comparison is to be made with the Jesus of the Gospels, Muhammad "was elevated to luminous heights and reached a position comparable […] yet […] he remained *abduhu*, God's servant and his creature […]" (Schimmel, 1985, p. 142). Were it not for the Sufi innovation of Muhammad's personality as being seen as a consequence of a religio-political polemic, it would seem difficult to assume its purpose as otherwise coincidental.

The 'Sufi Muhammad'

The Sufi effort to produce a mystical biography of Muhammad is a clear indication of the need to infuse Islamic tradition with greater spiritual capital. This can be traced in two main constructions: Muhammad-mysticism and the Sufi Muhammad. Muhammad-mysticism is a distinctly Sufi practice; the Sufi Muhammad was the emerging outcome of that tradition. By producing the mystical biography of the Prophet, the Sufis were able to elevate the spirituality of Muhammad beyond what he said and did during his earthly ministry. Also, this allowed the Sufis to respond to the growing spiritual needs of the Muslim community by speaking through their mystical Muhammad. However, the Sufis, being Muslim, had their mystical Muhammad rooted in the humility of his humanity as both a simple messenger and servant of God. This view is reflected in the Sufi doctrine of *fana* (annihilation) in that the greatest of men (i.e., Muhammad), in order to rise to the heights of spiritual attainment, was indeed the lowliest servant (*abduhu*). Indeed, this is one of many such sentiments that have been argued in this work to have been a component feature of the general polemic aimed at undermining the integrity of Christian opposition, both religiously and politically, and in order to determine a marked difference in the richness of the Muslim understanding as the supreme religion.

The practice of venerating the Prophet was, by and large, absent prior to the ninth century. Muhammad-mysticism and the 'figure' of a Sufi Muhammad, however, emerges post-ninth century. The Sufi motivation for this was embedded in a period of competing Muslim–Christian dialogue in which the Sufis are key participants from 850 CE onward. In this space, the Sufis contend for power as defined by their attempt to establish a competing 'spiritual capital' – with the aim of superseding the Christian treatment of Jesus. Schimmel had suggested that this was connected to the collective need within the Muslim community for personal 'contact' with an accessible agent of divine representation.

The 'Muhammad' of the Sufis, albeit uniquely Muslim, is conceived in an extraordinary way as a 'mystical' and 'cosmic' entity capable of securing the salvation of Muslim souls. Therefore, the Sufic interpretation of Muhammad was an

important way in which Sufis negotiated power in social space; this distinguished them not only from other forms as practiced by Shi'a and Sunni, but also and particularly from mystical elements in Christianity. This process was inspired by social realities linked with the politicisation of religious doctrine. Based on traditional views about the person of Muhammad, Sufis codified important aspects of the Prophet's biography with the specific aim to convert his earthly stature into an ideal cosmological perfection.

Notes

1 Parallels in the rise of high art for nobility as a way of distinguishing themselves from peasant classes can be found in the history of class construction. See, for example, Dewald (1996, p. 157). Bourdieu makes the point about power vis-à-vis cultural hegemony. His expansion on the legitimation of 'taste' in *La distinción* is an example of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167) through the attainment of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 41).
2 See, for example, Patricia Thomson's discussion on Bourdieu's field theory; in particular, her use of the analogy of 'force-field' (Grenfell, 2008, pp. 67–81).

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7 Sufism and the politics of 'Jesus'[1]

The previous chapter observed the construction of the 'Sufi Muhammad', the 'Perfect Man', and the ideal of cosmic salvation in Islam. This was a process borne out of Muslim interaction with Christianity in regions heavily populated and dominated by Christian Orthodox tradition. Yet this encounter does not speak of the limit of Muslim knowledge about Christianity. Muslims drew the main bulk of their knowledge about Christian doctrine from the Qur'an. There is an entire chapter – entitled *Maryam* – devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus leading up to the Immaculate Conception. Formally, Islamic awareness of Jesus is mainly derived from the Qur'an, and is therefore strictly limited to the infancy narrative, since the chapter ends with the birth of the baby Jesus and the performance of his first miracle, speaking from within the cradle. What knowledge Muslims generally procured about the adult Jesus, that is, the Biblical tradition, about what he taught, his life, and crucifixion, was transmitted through the collection of prophetic stories known as *qisas al-anbiya*. There are sporadic references to Christian doctrine about the death of Jesus on the cross and the Trinity in the Qur'an, but these are only briefly noted in reproach (4:171; 5:73; 19:35; 19:88, 91–92).

In this chapter, the Muslim understanding of Jesus, as fascinating a subject it may be, is not the focus; rather, it is the Sufi rendering of Jesus that will be the main point of concern. Here I will examine the Sufi adoption of Jesus as a literary device and as an example of a political mechanism used to defuse opposition.

Jesus is a noted prophetic figure within Islam and a recognised model of Muslim piety within its mystical tradition (Khalidi, 2001; Ridgeon, 2001; Lewisohn, 2001; Mourad, 1996; Singh, 2008; Leirvik, 2010; Sarrio, 2011). I argue that there is a pronounced emphasis on the figure of Jesus and Mary within the Islamic tradition, and more specifically, a more nuanced and deliberate emphasis on Jesus in Sufism. Jesus is not singled out in the Islamic tradition in the way that he is in the New Testament, since Muslim thinkers treated other biblical figures with the same zeal. Rather, Muslim admiration for Jesus and other Old Testament prophets served one reason only: to legitimate the authority of Islamic doctrine. To the Muslim, Jesus was Muslim, as were all the prophets. Among the prophets, however, Jesus is cast as a 'John the Baptist' for Muhammad in the Qur'an; he is made a herald of the imminent Apostle of God (61:6). This appropriation extended into Sufism, albeit in a more amplified fashion. Muhammad was made

into a 'Christ-like' persona; the source of all the world's salvation (21:107) to resemble the cosmic centrality placed upon Jesus in Christianity. This was by no means a blanket understanding among all Sufis. As the subject of the previous chapter, it was deduced from a special reading of Sufi literature on the adoration of the Prophet. What is also evident is that such a level of adoration and centrality was also extended to the Sufi Pir (spiritual head) and those considered *qutb* (poles of the age). Of course, they were never openly placed on par with the Prophet, nor with any other prophet for that matter, but the sometimes-fanatical devotion to the Sufi master was, in Islam, unprecedented; so too was the rare treatment of the master in some circles as holy. Within the Sufi tradition, spiritual masters, or those deemed to be holy men, were commonly attributed with 'sainthood' (*walayah*) or perceived as the 'Perfect Man' (*ensan al-kamil*) – a practice that often stipulated an endowment of extraordinary 'powers' or 'gifts' (*keramat*). Likewise, the Sufi view of the masters of the path purveyed a strong 'Jesus-like' sentiment about the sacrosanctity of the Sufi master. Although this shows an important parallel with the Christian view of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and it was important for connecting Muslim and Christian ideology, it was by no means an indication of Sufi marginality and/or digression from Islam. Instead, it firmly reflected the significance of Sufi 'spiritual capital' during key periods in history, namely the early mediaeval period, and which was used by them to wield power and control in the politics of exchange between Muslims and Christians.

Outlines of subtle discourse about 'Jesus'

If ever in doubt about the validation of Jesus in Islam, two quotes from Rumi, in particular, should remedy all concern: "Created from the wine of love, Only love remains when I die" (*Diwan*, ghazal 683, line, 7109; cf., Forouzanfar, c. 2002, p. 242) – a reference to Jesus, the Last Supper, and the Resurrection; and "I've seen a world without a trace of death, All atoms here have Jesus' pure breath" (Nicholson, 1982, p. 45) – an indication of Jesus' transformative power. Two points of clarification are necessary before proceeding. First, the fact that 'Jesus' features within Sufi literature is not an indication of a secret 'Sufi conversion' or preference for Christianity (at least not in any manifest sense). Second, the nature of this reference is in keeping with the Muslim view of Jesus as a prophet and a man, who was, albeit, specially endowed with miraculous works (Qur'an 3:49–51, 5:109–110; McConnell, 1988; Mourad, 1996; Khalidi, 2001). The common reference to Jesus found in Sufi literature is, in part, a demonstration of the consistency and correlation of Sufi literature with the content of the Qur'an, since Jesus is one of the foremost-cited prophetic figures. There may be other valid reasons for referring to Jesus, all of which cannot be called to mind here; however, there is one explanation in particular that I wish to pursue: the political nature of the use of 'Jesus' by Sufis in relation to the Muslim–Christian dialogue.

Depictions of Jesus in Islamic mysticism need to be understood both within their historical and geo-social setting, as well as in terms of how knowledge about such exemplifications was generated and for what reasons. If we apply

Bourdieu's premise that social agents are located within the 'field', we can surmise that they are ultimately placed to compete for power and control (Bourdieu, 1999). For Bourdieu it was not enough to simply observe certain occurrences or communication between agents; rather, the key to understanding interactions and social phenomena was in the examination of 'social space' within which the exchange took place (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 148). Bourdieu's push to always enquire after the social reasons behind statements and actions is indicative of the point. The proliferation of Jesus' appearance in Sufi literature must, therefore, trigger a line of enquiry about the social reasons for its occurrence and the social and political impact that this may have had on Muslim societies of the medieval period. I argue that the prominent reference to Jesus in the Qur'an, and the relational celebration of Jesus' character and spiritual qualities in Sufi literature – in the historical setting of the Muslim middle ages – is to make a strong theological statement within a political context and to raise the political issue, thus making a legitimating statement (posed at Christians at the time) about 'who it is that retains the image of the *true* Jesus'. Granted, Muslim rule was generally tolerant of its Jewish and Christian population, and although this is not to deny those constructive and positive exchanges between Muslims and Christians in the same period, it is instead to highlight the specific nature of their exchange at the height of Muslim power. Muslims held political power; and their discourse dominated the 'field'.

The 'Sufi Jesus' in a 'Sufi Islam'

The main bulk of the Sufis' knowledge about Jesus is derived from Islamic materials, but some also had first-hand knowledge of the New Testament (Cragg, 1985). Jesus is, no doubt, one of the more frequently mentioned figures in the Qur'an, who is cited twenty-five times and is seen as a great prophet, second only to Muhammad. The Islamic tradition offers the special designation to Him, 'Jesus the son of Mary' (*Isa ibn Maryam*). The Qur'an further recognises Jesus as being born of a virgin, having performed miracles, raised the dead, and restored monotheism by revealing the Gospel (*Injil*) (Vernon, 2009). Irrespective of the apparent concessions made toward what almost seems like a 'Muslim adoption of Jesus', Muslims maintain that Jesus did not die on the cross, was not divine, nor was he the Son of God or part of a Holy Trinity; that is, they deny all doctrines that contravene the uncompromising Muslim doctrine of *tawhid* (absolute oneness of God; that God is one and without partners). The Muslim narrative is demonstrative of a clear notion about the person of Jesus, and the Muslims were motivated by its truth to the extent that the Christian view about Jesus' divinity is almost utterly sidelined and refuted in any interfaith exchange either in the past or at present (cf., Khalidi, 2001). To the observer this may seem nothing more than a doctrinal dispute, which is taken up by the Qur'anic literature as a rebuttal to the ecumenical councils (Beeston, 1983). Given the severity of doctrinal dispute between Muslims and Christians, it is interesting that the Sufi interpretations of Jesus do seem to resonate a peculiar level of affinity with Christian reckonings of

Him. One can observe the pseudo-Christian sensibility as illustrated in an aspiration to be 'Jesus-like' in Rumi's verse (Forouzanfar, c. 2002, p. 1289):

> Beware: don't say, "There aren't any [real] travellers on the Way", (Or), "There aren't any who are Jesus-like and traceless." Since you aren't an intimate of secrets, you have been thinking that others are not as well.

Verses like the above can be misleading. Sufis did stretch the boundaries of Islamic theology, but they never rejected any part of it outright. Their notions of Jesus are a good example of the Sufi method to adjust, tweak, and shift ever so slightly the blurring lines of doctrinal reality that lay at the borders of tradition. Close examinations of Jesus in Sufi literature provide the definitive standpoint of Sufi interpretations of Him, but these need to be approached with little more than a cursory reading of Sufi literature, as done in the past (Heck, 2007; Chittick, 2000). It seems counterintuitive to claim that the Sufis adhered to a notion of Jesus as a demigod, or that they may have been engaged in secret reverence of Him; but it would not be unreasonable to consider that they may have been tempted to fashion themselves and their tradition upon the image and teachings of a Christian or mystically 'internalised' Jesus such as suggested elsewhere (cf., Gorman, 2007). To be sure, Sufis never entirely depart from the view of the Islamic Jesus confined to the station of prophethood and His humanity, but instances of irregularity can be seen in the imagination of some mystics where the 'Sufi Jesus' is made comparable with a Christian Jesus. However, even when the Sufis did make such appraisals of the Christian Jesus, it was deliberate and executed with the purpose of a gentler persuasion than that of their mainstream brethren; for them, it was certain that their Islam held the correct interpretation of Jesus, the Messiah.

It is interesting to consider whether the Sufis were producing a new discourse on Jesus that was subtle, yet powerfully expressive of the authority of Muslim faith and practice, at least, in a way that the mystics understood their faith. It is possible to discern the layered Sufi reading of the Qur'anic Jesus as giving some weight to the internalisation process through which the Sufis themselves (re)imagined Jesus Christ in a mystical light. In Bourdieusian terms, this is the way in which the Sufi bid for power in the 'field' of interfaith dialogue, and it can be detected as a form of 'spiritual capital' that helped them to maintain a degree of control and influence in the discourse. The social and political involvement of Sufism is not accidental, but rather intimately connected with increasing patronage and popularity of Sufi masters and the gradual development of the socio-political role of the Khaniqah (Sufi hostels or houses of worship) within the Muslim world (Bastani-Parizi, 1998, pp. 70–79). In terms of Foucauldian discourse analysis, this was, on the one hand, Sufism asserting its social and political influence by exerting the growing weight of its interpretive capital, but also, on the other hand, its way of creating a new intellectual space of discourse that competed with the Muslim–Christian dialectic. In this way, Sufism is both unique in the sense that it was at times generally seen by the ulama (religious

clerics) as socially and morally deviant, and that it was paradoxically, though independently, active in successfully bridging an ever-widening intellectual gap between Muslims and Christians. Therefore, Sufi literature reveals renditions of Jesus as a 'proto-Sufi' who is dressed in woollen garb, for instance (Leirvik, 2010, p. 84; Khalidi, 2001, p. 126). The Sufis retained the reality of Jesus as a historical prophet of Islam, but occasionally made recourse to Jesus in figurative terms, which in turn drew closer the ear of their mystical Christian counterparts. This is certainly indicative of the Sufi propensity today to modulate the discourse between both Islam and Christianity through a Jesus-centred dialogue. It is also, quite rightly, a valid illustration of the Sufi preoccupation with the inward meaning of the Qur'an, which paradoxically excluded the Sufi from the level of normative doctrinal intercourse. As such, Sufism can be seen, from its earliest phase, to capitulate a potential method of social inclusion that was more tolerant of difference than its more doctrinally rigid exoteric counterparts. The esoteric importance of such references as the 'spirit' or 'breath' (of God) had therefore become the apparent tools with which the Muslim Jesus narrative, which is drawn straight from Qur'an, is then turned into a constructive vessel with which to enhance communications with the Christian community. This was further enhanced by the special Sufi inclusion of Jesus as a 'Perfect Man' (*insan al-kamil*), along with other figures (foremost of whom being the Prophet) whom Muslims held in such esteem. The phrase *Perfect Man* was a borrowing from the works of the mystic of Andalucía, the Sheikh al-Akbar (the Great Master), Ibn al-'Arabi (Chodkiewicz, 2002).

The 'Sufi Jesus', therefore, offers an important symbolic correlation with the Christian Jesus as the embodiment of 'love' and 'spiritual perfection' (e.g., Khalidi, 2001, pp. 178–180; Nurbakhsh, 1992, p. 57). This was the Sufi bypass of the Christian 'exclusivity' of Jesus, while yet maintaining the inner value of what Christian doctrine preached about the healing and salvific quality of believing in Christ. This was not an admission of Christian salvation, but rather a restrained rejection of the authority of the Church and its office. For Sufis, Jesus was part of the entourage of notable Islamic prophetic figures, some of whom, like Moses and Joseph, are given slightly more 'space' in their works (Renard, 1987, p. 48). Indeed, Jesus did not hold any particular significance for Muslims or for Sufis, but the pertinence of the latter in terms of Muslim–Christian relations is clear. To the point, Sufis engaged in a more diplomatic association of certain correlating facets of faith that only appeared to give Jesus precedence over others. In fact, both Jesus and Joseph were on equal footing as perfect embodiments of humanity in Sufi literature (King, 1990). This was simultaneously a manoeuvre to defuse the singular emphasis that Christianity placed on Jesus and to expose the shortfall in Islam's salvific narrative. To effect, Jesus was, for the Sufis, emblematic of several important qualities: purity, perfection, love, and healing – all of which spoke to the softer internal spiritual core of Islamic doctrine and Qur'anic content, and drew closer the Christian (and other) opposition to the heart of Islam. The consistent role that 'Jesus' has played in both the mainstream Muslim use of Him as well as at the hands of the Sufis (Cragg, 1985, p. 60) raises the question as to the social

reasons behind the use of Jesus in Sufi literature. The clear response, as evidenced by the proclivity of Sufis and Sufi orders to be located either at the peripheries or in areas of social cleavage, reveals the core concern of Sufism with winning over non-Muslims; particularly, those like Christians who were given a 'book'. A more subtle response is surmised from the same context as the Sufi aspiration to stake a claim in the developing world of Islamic religiosity.

Early Sufis did present themselves as Christian mendicants – as evidenced by their woollen attire (indicative of Jesus' austere garb) – but which was an obvious deflection intended to make a dialogue of access to Jesus important for both sides. It is also pertinent to note the Sufi interest in winning converts for Islam, wherever possible, as perhaps close in rigour to the way that Jesuits would come to serve the Church. Today, the Sufis are well known for their openness to other faiths, and some to such extent as to be discussed within the framework of 'new' or neo-Sufism(s) (cf., Sedgwick, 2012; Howell, 2001). True to form, the adaptability and flexibility of Sufi philosophy had never compromised its core devotion to Islamic principles or their admiration for the Prophet. In actuality, several case studies substantiate the fact that Sufis had adapted their doctrines in given circumstances, not only to gain converts, but more importantly to maintain social cohesion (Malik and Hinnells, 2006). It may not be a necessarily desirable expectation, but it is not uncommon for Sufis to have thus purposefully and consistently integrated the figure of Jesus into their literary discourse in order to feign familiarity with their Christian contemporaries. Even in a contemporary setting, and as part of their politics of discourse within the 'field' of power (Bourdieu, 1999), the Sufis are best exemplified by their ability to blur the lines of difference with regard to religious doctrine and identity. In this way, and according to how Bourdieu would have described it, Sufis maintain a level of social 'distinction' by drawing on a vast wealth of cultural capital on reserve, in order to constantly negotiate social space and political control. There is no doubt that the Sufis were certainly engaged in convincing Christians of the superiority of Islamic doctrine (Arberry, 1983, pp. 167, 209, 234, 274–275, 371–373, 386–387), precipitating the fact that Islam, and not Christianity, possessed the true interpretation of Jesus. It would be ahistorical, and detracting from the true social impact of Sufi politics, to deduce the reverse hypothesis that Sufis were affiliating themselves with Christianity because they somehow imagined themselves as sharing core doctrines. All Sufis were first and foremost Muslims, whose mysticism only facilitated their aim to perfect their Islam and to assert its superiority among the faiths (cf., Arberry, 1983).

Even though thematic correlations are noted in the present work for comparative analysis, they are not made to force the view that Sufism and Christianity are doctrinally compatible. In their use of symbolic language, the Sufis could just as easily have used any prophetic figure, as did Rumi, who more often than not invoked the name of Joseph to represent the extraordinariness of spiritual fulfilment (King, 1990, pp. 90–95). Yet they did; and the fact that they did retain a special emphasis on Jesus in their literature is indicative of a long-term correspondence with Christian thought and practice.

Over time, the Sufi aim was to underline apparent correlations that could be made visible, but with the intention of placing them in their relational context of social and political discourse, and to showcase their ability to operate within a newly formed framework of mystical consciousness: their Islam.

The socio-political aspects of the 'Sufi Jesus'

It is well known that Sufism is a passive component of Islam with the propensity to generate constructive outcomes such as better social conditions for Muslims, particularly in the contemporary West. For instance, this may also include the potential for Sufism to contribute towards, and facilitate, a reformed Muslim identity which may be suited to specific geo-social environments; Sufism can re-engage ecological concerns; it can be a key factor in an Islamic Renaissance; Sufism can foster a reinvigorating and stabilising influence on socio-political 'trouble' regions; and it can contribute to a cosmopolitan society as well as a pluralistic world culture (cf., Ferguson, 1996). To the point, Sufism is best situated to mediate a range of 'cultural synergies', while maintaining the integrity of Islamic ideals and lifestyle (Ferguson, 1996). In other words, Sufis have the ability to effortlessly 'blend' into society without having to detract from their religious identity. In not denying the possibilities that Sufism provides, my contention is that Sufism has its own prerogatives, and these should not be undermined in any given attempt to arrive at an understanding about what motivates Sufism to 'act' socially and to have an impact on society. As outlined, the key factors that constitute the social reasons behind its actions are as a) ambassadors to Islam and b) interpreters of doctrine.

Where special attention is paid to the literary implication of mystical thought, a general rule that presents itself time and again is that the literature typically doubles as a 'window' into new insights, and Sufism is no exception. Sufis, although firmly rooted in Islamic tradition, demonstrate an uncanny ability to simultaneously hold fast to the literal dogma of doctrine, but also carry the meaning of Islamic doctrine "well beyond what we would normally identify as Islamic norms" (King, 1990, p. 89). Multiple stories may be drawn from the biography of sheikh Abu Sa'id Abul Khayr (d. 1049) (*Asrar al-Tawid*) to illustrate the point; however, one in particular will suffice. He was known to have said: "The doctrine that I preach is contained in the eighth seventh of the Koran"; that is, not the seven sevenths (the entire Qur'an) (Nicholson, 1994, p. 59):

> No, the infinite Word of God that was sent down to Muhammad is the whole seven seventh of the Koran; but that which He causes to come into the hearts of His servants does not admit of being numbered and limited, nor does it ever cease.

The quote reveals Abu Sa'id's fondness for a distinct Sufistic attitude defined by theophanic utterances, initially espoused by the 'notorious' Mansour al-Hallaj (d. 922) in Baghdad (Arberry, 1983, pp. 266–271; Nicholson, 1976, pp. 150–153),

and was earlier attributed to Bayazid al-Bistami (d. 874). Hallaj became more a symbol for certain later Sufis' dissonance with the rule of religious authority. Being no exception, Abu Sa'id played to the Hallajian tone when it suited him, as did later Sufis of a similar persuasion, as a demonstration of a passive resistance to the social and political rule of Islamic authorities. Such displays of discordance with Islamic orthodoxy are portrayals not of a rejection of Islam, as may be thought, but more accurately a demonstration of the growing influence of Sufi sheikhs and their fraternities in the twelfth century (Trimingham, 1998).

Although Abu Sa'id made no overt case of 'Jesus' in his writings, there were those Sufis whose legacy and works made the point of the 'politics' of Jesus explicit. I note the life and death of al-Hallaj and Ibn al-'Arabi's theosophical writings, in particular, and to some extent – although well within the bounds of 'orthodox mysticism' – the poetry of Rumi. The life of al-Hallaj, largely captured by Louis Massignon (Massignon, 1994), presented a peculiar imitation of the crucifixion of Christ, which had convinced Massignon of a more than coincidental occurrence of this 'Christ-like' saint (Massignon, 1994, p. 17). Ibn al-'Arabi's conceptualisation of *wahdat al-wujud* (the philosophy of 'unity of being') and *insan al-kamil* (the ideal of the 'Perfect Man') (Chodkiewicz, 2002) were subtle contradictions to the orthodox cosmic notions of *tawhid* ('absolute oneness') and *nabuwa* ('prophethood'). Furthermore, they allowed for the mystical rationalisation of sainthood as something akin to the Christian envisaging of Christ as saviour. Ibn al-'Arabi's writings were particularly useful for the Sufis who used their saintliness to manipulate the political sphere through their power of persuasion. Rumi's poetry gave some measure of weight to the symbolic power of language and its transformative quality, idealised as the social tool of the saint in demonstrating the power of his miracles, and thereby legitimising his unquestioned (political) authority in commanding the reverence and obedience of the people.

The politics of poetics and philosophy in the literature of Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi

To explore the social motivation behind Sufism's role in the political sphere would depend on a closer examination of the social agents involved, whether individuals, groups, or institutions. To begin with, almost all Sufi figures were experts in jurisprudence and theology, even the most outspoken of them, al-Hallaj (d. 922), and, after him, Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani (1098–1131), both of whom were martyred as a direct result of their deliberate provocation (Massignon, 1994; Lewisohn, 1999). Sufis were, in fact, particularly renowned for their knowledge of the Islamic sciences, which made them direct competitors for the privilege of social status and state patronage more commonly enjoyed by the ulama (the orthodox religious scholars). However, this section examines the works of two emblematic Sufi figures, Ibn al-'Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi, who – despite their unfathomable depth – retained a balanced approach to mysticism and orthodoxy.

Given that the ulama were experts in Islamic doctrine and law, their interaction with Christianity was somewhat ideologically constrained. They were limited to a

more formulaic dialogue, and their reference to 'Jesus' – as a common denominator in discourse – was confined to a literal advocacy of the Islamic view. I assert that a truly innovative way was paved by the Sufi use of 'Jesus'. This was tantamount to the degree to which Sufi lore had developed independently of 'normative Islam' (Mourad, 1996), and was to be a signifier of the way Sufis were moderating a 'third' level of discourse with Christians that simultaneously transcended and invigorated the doctrinal core of Islamic orthodoxy. It can be argued that this is a good example of an important way in which the Sufis capitalised on existing Islamic literature to procure their mystical philosophy and offer new insights into its meaning and transformative power when in dialogue with Christianity. For instance, Jesus was among the few prophetic figures of Islam located within the mystical tradition of the 'Perfect Man', as explored by Ibn al-'Arabi. In addition, Rumi quite often emphasised the miraculous quality of Jesus' breath, as confirmed in the Qur'an (5:110), viewing Jesus as synonymous with the 'sacred breath' and attributing to him the healing power of his breath, whilst noting that Jesus himself was conceived by the breath of Gabriel (Nicholson, 1940, p. 31). Indeed, the technical language employed by the Sufis – and which was seemingly 'Christian' – was a deliberate ploy to simply strengthen Islamic discourse. It remained distinctly detached from its Christian association, being used strictly within the correct context of an Islamic understanding of such terms. The attributed terms of Ibn al-'Arabi's exposition on the 'virgin birth' and Rumi's reference to the 'sacred breath', which were based on the *surah* 19 of the Qur'an, had never implied a Sufi acceptance of Christian doctrine. Instead, their Sufi utilisation demonstrated an effort to advance the correct Muslim view. An encounter with Christian doctrine was, however, influential in the development of the idea of the 'Perfect Man', equated as it is with the Christian 'Son of God'; which, again, clearly demonstrates the level of confidence with which Sufis engaged in the politics of knowledge (Safi, 2006).

Thus, a politics of 'Jesus' can be further extrapolated in a closer observation of the works of Rumi and Ibn al-'Arabi. Both of these figures utilise the idea of 'perfection' as a personal means toward reaching God. One of the ways in which Rumi portrayed Jesus was as "the perfection of humanity" (King, 1990, p. 85), which freely corresponded with Ibn al-'Arabi's use of the 'Perfect Man'. Both Sufis held that Jesus was a typification of "the 'Perfect Man' whose 'otherness' has been sublimated and absorbed in the essential unity of the Godhead" (King, 1990, p. 84; Nicholson, 1940, p. 48; Austin, 1980, pp. 34–39). In simple terms, 'Jesus' could display the 'attributes of God' and, at the same time, reflect the 'universality of God' (Nicholson, 1940, pp. 33, 49, 55, 120, 180; King, 1990, p. 84). Furthermore:

> [A]t the spiritual and intellectual level, man's intelligence prompts him to impose on the Cosmos the forms and images of his own imagination and awareness. In the case of high spiritual attainment this human capacity may become a microcosmic channel of the divine creative act […]
>
> (Austin, 1980, pp. 35–36)

At this juncture, a comparative sketch can be drawn to further tease out the Sufi incorporation of a politics of 'Jesus' in (Muslim–Christian) interfaith dialogue. The fact is that both the Sufi notion of the 'Perfect Man' and the Christian idea of the 'Son of God' actually specify divine fulfilment within individual experience. The noted exception is that the mystical state of the 'Perfect Man' is one of 'universality'. The uniquely Sufic assertion that the 'Perfect Man' is connected with all other perfect men is thus not as 'exclusive' as Jesus is in Christian dogma. The point is made in Rumi's verse where "Jesus is one [i.e., unified] […] but at the same time, he is one to different people in many different ways" (King, 1990, p. 86, n. 25). Similarly, Ibn al-'Arabi provides a resolution between the two opposing religious positions on Jesus: the Qur'anic 'Jesus son of Mary' (*Isa ibn Maryam*) and the biblical 'Jesus son of God'. He suggests: "As the son of Mary, Jesus is human; but as one who could revive the dead, Jesus was 'of God as Spirit'" (King, 1990, p. 87; Austin, 1980, pp. 176, 178, 181). At a much deeper level, Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi's Sufistic conceptualisations of the Qur'anic Jesus were more than inspired verses that honour a Muslim prophet. Their works represent the layers of discourse that fill the social and political landscape in which they were active agents of communication between religious denominations. Both Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi were residents of a culturally rich and religiously diverse geo-social sphere: Andalucía and Konya. Furthermore, their experience and responsibilities as educators (Sufi sheikhs) serve to portray the importance of the politics of mysticism in their respective environments.

I argue that the strategic employment of 'Jesus' in poetic and philosophical discourse should be recognised as an assertion of the superiority of Muslim tolerance, learning, and cultural capacity. The Jesus of the mystical imagination would no doubt compete with the image of the Christian saviour, and thus the emerging reference to a 'Sufi Jesus' would be a more adequate category than that of the 'Muslim Jesus' (cf., Khalidi, 2001) for how the Sufi mystics actually envisioned Jesus. Through Jesus, the Sufis conveyed the great paradox of their own mystical formulations about the nature of divine human relations and, in particular, their own ideal of sainthood and perfection of being. At this deeper mystical level, theirs was a vision that in important ways went beyond the Jesus of the Qur'an, and in so doing the Sufis formulated a theological bypass that allowed Jesus to be placed at the centre of the human imaginative and creative process, which was directly linked to God through a perception of Jesus as the 'Perfect Man' and 'the breath of God' (see above). It can be argued that the Sufis transformed the prophetic Jesus of the Qur'an into a figure with "a special capacity to renew and transform human lives, to render them whole and complete" (King, 1990, pp. 89–90). This naturally created new channels of communication and endless possibilities of social as well as intellectual intercourse between Muslim and Christian communities, and thus alleviated anticipated religious tensions for improved cohabitation within settings such as medieval Spain and Turkey.

The works of Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi presented the Muslim with a figurative internalisation process, which did not transgress orthodox opinion wholesale, but, nevertheless, by which Jesus could be made to become an agent of mystical

cognisance. It is also worth reiterating that the Sufis were careful to place Jesus among the rank of other perfect men, who were also imbued with their own uniquely divine gifts, which indicates that Jesus was never in any way uniquely glorified by them (King 1990, p. 90; Schimmel, 1978, p. 179; Soroudi, 1979, pp. 221–227). The present comparative analysis signifies the ingenuity of Sufi literary adaptation as a mechanism for nullifying the Christian view of Jesus as Son of God, while, at the same time, and more importantly, extending the imagination of Muslim understanding of Jesus. This is a demonstration of Sufism's aptitude as a two-way channel that can initiate openness and learning in order to facilitate greater social cohesion and belonging between two parties who cohabitate in a socio-political setting.

The presence of an active Sufi component within medieval Muslim society may be a pertinent example of the potential for Sufism to serve in a similar mediatory capacity in modern societies, helping to alleviate tension between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. There is no doubt that the medieval politics of the Sufis went a long way in helping to avoid particular misgivings between Muslims and Christians. My assertion, however, is that Sufism can operate within society in more ways than one. It often has a double function in society and politics: having the potential to delegate the twofold task of both receiving and dispatching cultural products, which can be both beneficial and detrimental, and as a facilitator of an honest exchange for a valuable and constructive conversation between Muslim and non-Muslim. Yet all in all, Sufism ultimately serves Islam. The question is: *how* does it serve Islam? Is it a node primarily charged with Islamic dominance or a force spreading a deeper appreciation of a misunderstood religion? This is why the study of the activity of independent Sufi groups in different regions of the world is important. Because, Sufism can be simultaneously involved in spreading Islam by gaining adherents whilst diffusing tensions by fostering awareness and understanding.

Deviance and disruption in the spiritual politics of Al-Hallaj

Whereas the Sufism of Rumi and Ibn al-'Arabi was an expression of 'cohesive Sufism', the point of drawing on al-Hallaj here is to show the disruptive and potentially deviant face of Sufism – what we might call a 'disruptive Sufism' by contrast. However, this disruptive force serves to fulfil two main functions strictly within the boundaries of Islamic doctrine. First, al-Hallaj intended to shake the Muslim community into a reawakening of religion and faith. Second, he chose to carry out this aim in a particularly confronting way – as is reflected in the public trial, humiliation, and execution of Christ. Such was typical of the extroverted and robust nature of al-Hallaj's own character, the nature of his 'Sufism', and the consequential and profound impact that it had upon the society of his time.

It is worth noting that there was no Sufi more devoted to the essence of Islamic doctrine and its highest meaning than al-Hallaj (Massignon, 1994, p. 273). This Sufi figure is best remembered among Orientalist scholars for the uncanny correlation that the account of the martyrdom of his life was to have with that of the

execution of Jesus. Without reading too much into what is an obvious parallel of historic incidence, both Jesus and al-Hallaj were condemned for the sin of association with God, which is strictly forbidden in Judaic and Islamic traditions; other instances, such as al-Hallaj's infamous declaration, *ana'l haqq* ("I am the Truth/Absolute", i.e., God) (Massignon 1974, p. 175; Nicholson, 1994, p. 79), parallel with the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, one of which is Jesus' decree: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6). In both instances, the use of the "I am" prefix is an assertion of the presence of God. Note, the use of the phrase is consistent in both Old and New Testament narrative, but is not cognate to the Qur'an. Another parallel grabs our attention: both figures are surrounded by legends of resurrection, or are perhaps 'resurrected' through the imagination of the communities that preserved their memory and teaching.

The theological challenge that the Qur'an makes about the crucifixion is that Jesus does not die on the cross as God in the flesh. In Christian tradition Jesus is crucified and dies on the cross and rises again after three days, whereas here (in keeping with the Gnostic and Docetic traditions) the Muslim view purveys al-Hallaj as being butchered and crucified but surviving death (Arberry, 1983, pp. 269–271). It would seem that the Sufi use of al-Hallaj's account betrays the doctrinal preference of the Sufis, and is, therefore, ultimately an indirect critique of the Christian representation of Jesus. However, the Sufi view is not entirely congruent with the Islamic. What al-Hallaj's example represents is the refined Sufi doctrine of *fana fi'llah* (annihilation or dissolution in God) and *baqa bi'llah* (subsistence in Him), but it does so in a strikingly literal sense. The Sufi rendition of this doctrine, though virtually non-existent in the Islamic canon – except, say, by inference – is far more moderate in its interpretation. The Sufi master of Baghdad, al-Junayd, conceived of the Sufi doctrine to mean the defeat and subduing of the *nafs* (substituted for ego, or lower self, or passions). The doctrine of the *nafs* in Islamic theology explained the source or breath of life gifted from God to animate the body of Man. And in the Sufi reckoning, the *nafs* had, since the time of expulsion from Paradise, become representative of the fallen state of God's prized creation. Even this idea, in its moderate form, is akin to the Christian doctrine of original sin.

What is for certain is that descriptions of the Sufi experience make it rather difficult, if not near impossible, to discern humanity and divinity. The hard line that is drawn in the sand of exoteric religious understanding between Man and God becomes blurred, if not altogether non-existent. In the world of Sufism, it is virtually futile to ponder where the line of humanness ceases and the divine begins.

Al-Hallaj was not the first or only mystic to talk about the merging of human and divine. Bayazid, before al-Hallaj, related that God is known by God; that is, "He who discourses of eternity must have within him the lamp of eternity" (Nicholson, 1989, p. 51). Rumi too, two centuries after al-Hallaj, elaborated the merging of subject and object through the use of symbolic metaphor in his poetic discourse. The 'drop' cannot see the ocean through the eyes of the 'drop', it can only see the 'ocean' through the eyes of the 'ocean', whereby, when the drop falls

into the ocean, no trace of it remains (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 41). The difference was that the Sufism of both Bayazid and Rumi was aimed at an internalised revolution. Bayazid was careful to demonstrate that in moments of ecstasy he was completely beside himself and that no trace of his identity remained (Mojaddedi, 2001, p. 47). By contrast, al-Hallaj had a manifest personality that troubled unaccustomed onlookers in his manner of speech and behaviour (Mason, 1999, p. 71; Nicholson, 1976, pp. 150–153; Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 41) that was similar to the way Jesus was seen by the Pharisees. It is, therefore, pertinent to distinguish the literary from the historical al-Hallaj; the historical al-Hallaj may have stood for an exposed Sufi sentiment that posed a deliberate similarity with Christian doctrine. Whether al-Hallaj was actually guilty of 'infusion', or the Christian doctrine of incarnation (*hulul*), remains uncertain. There is no doubt he believed himself to be a devout Muslim (Massignon, 1994, p. 273), but what appeared to trouble the tribunal who had called him on account of heresy was his meddling with doctrine (Massignon, 1994, pp. 248–250). For instance, Hallaj made certain suppositions about human (*nasut*) and divine (*lahut*) nature, speculating that 'personality' survived even in their union (Nicholson, 1994, p. 78). What is certain is that both al-Hallaj and the historical Jesus were central to political intrigue, and likely of their own accord (Mason, 1999, p. 73). One final point about al-Hallaj is again an observed parallel to the legacy of the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels. That is, the historical al-Hallaj was at last made the poet's muse, which meant that the Sufis utilised him, as they did Jesus, as a discursive and literary trope that preserved what they held to be the essence of their machinations on 'love' and 'sacrifice', envisioning al-Hallaj as the personification of mystical transfiguration but never associating him with singular pre-eminence in the way that Christians viewed Christ.

'Two-way theory' effect of Sufism: delivering and receiving

To draw on the survey of Muslim conversions to Christianity by Woodberry et al. (2007) as a parallel to my own fieldwork, I want to first explain the basic schematics of their assessment, and then to apply their findings to the 'two-way exchange' theory to which I have alluded in this book. The findings of Woodberry et al. (2007) convey three basic points that correspond with their segment titles and which will be translated and summarised into core domains of social existence that explain why Muslims convert to Christianity: lifestyle, psychology, and socio-political appropriation. These may be seen, in brief, as what Bourdieu would relate to as the influence of *habitus*. For Bourdieu, the operations of habitus were interlocked with two other aspects of his 'theory of practice' (Bourdieu, 1977): field and capital. As the master of suspicion (Bourdieu) would have it, the scholar – that is, the sociologist – is intermittently forced to ask the sociological question and not just the religious question that Woodberry et al. (2007) mean to impose. Muslims may be turning to Jesus, but *why* they are doing so, I am inclined to view, has much to do with, if not motivated by, factors at play within

the politics of the so-called 'global north' and 'global south' – factors that feed directly into the politics of identity, and the economic competition for resources throughout developing and developed nations. Such a view of the politics of legitimacy places Sufism squarely within the 'field of power' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999). Herein, Sufism is found, like all religions and spiritual groups, to be actively defending its own and directly contending for validity and control (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999).

The two-way exchange theory applied to this study refers to the twofold utility of Sufism, already signalled, which possesses within the social and political arena a *dual mobility*. The process unfolds as the exportation of Muslim culture and the importation of non-Muslim culture. Sufism, despite its 'spiritual cosmopolitanism', is ultimately Islamic; it is the mystical way (*tariqah*) of the Muslim. Even when transcending culture and difference, Sufi consciousness is inevitably centred within the core of Islam. Converts to the Sufi way may be attracted to its liberal attitude in some respects, and may find it generally liberating, but they are nevertheless indefinitely conforming to a form of Islam and Islamic culture. Of course, the 'type' of Islam and Islamic culture depends on the 'type' of Sufism in question: whether of the Persian, Turkish, North African, Indian, Southeast Asian, or other – yet all of these are Muslim in the end. So, Sufism can be an effective tool for overcoming cultural difference for Muslims, it can help foster tolerance and cosmopolitanism in the Muslim attitude, allow for a smoother process of integration within non-Muslim societies, and help build a contemporary western Muslim identity for the Muslim generation of the times and those of future generations. However, Sufism has the opposite effect in the reverse flow of accepting converts. It acts as a discreet gateway into the Islamic world: that is, its culture and religion – ultimately promoting Islamic ideology and outlook. Sufism may be a peaceful, 'friendly' Islam, but it is Islam nonetheless, which, although an obvious point, is a highly relevant one to make – since the mention of Sufism, due to extensive essentialisation as 'love', 'wine', 'Rumi poetry', and 'the ghazals of Hafiz', seems to infer something different in the mind of non-Muslims. Far from it, themes of love, wine, poetry, and merrymaking are all indelibly non-Islamic cultural components of greater Asia (especially regions affected by Persianate culture and language) which some Sufis (those of a less *shariah*-based persuasion) have incorporated into their 'Islam', and consequently their 'Sufism' (cf., Milani, 2012b, 2012c, 2014).

The 'Sufi Jesus'

From the point of view of the Islamic mystic, Jesus is the exemplary Sufi. He is neither a mere mortal as the *Qur'an* openly suggests, nor the singular saviour of all mankind as perceived by Christian religiosity. For the Sufi, he was one who had conquered the lower soul (*nafs*): "As Jesus rode his donkey, ride on it […] Let Jesus' spotless spirit be your goal" (Davis, 1984, p. 30). His breath, likened to the power of Sufi *dhikr*,[2] was also a life-giving force: "This breath of Jesus, which hourly brings forth another dawn, causes a sleeping world to raise its head from

the earth" (Attar, cited in Nurbakhsh, 1992, p. 51). Indeed, the late Master of the Nimatullahi Khaniqahi Sufi Order, Javad Nurbakhsh, wrote:

> It is the Sufis who have attempted to preserve the memory of Jesus as he really was, alive in their minds, and in the minds of others, and to keep him in their hearts. In Sufi literature, Jesus is the paragon of a perfect human being and […] a true master.
>
> (Nurbakhsh, 1992, p. 9)

From its beginnings, Sufi literature has portrayed Jesus as the symbol of purity and a pre-eminent example of a true '*darvish*' (to use the Persian vernacular).[3] Classical Sufi writers who referred to Jesus in this way have already demonstrated the importance of Jesus to Muslim thought; in their works, Jesus was enshrined as the 'instrument of God', a 'Perfect Man', and a true possessor of divine wisdom. The Sufi representation of Jesus, whereby his nature is deliberately probed, is thus provocative. For this reason, an analysis of related Christian themes, such as 'virgin birth', 'crucifixion', and 'resurrection', is germane to understanding their proper place within mystical thinking.

Surat al-Maryam is clear about the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin (Q 19:19–22); distinct emphasis, however, is placed upon the fact that Jesus is the son of Mary (*Isa bin Maryam*) and not the son of God. This is not so strange, since neither does Jesus refer to himself as 'God' nor the 'Son of God' in the Gospels. He addresses himself as 'the Son of Man' and compels his followers (during the course of his ministry) to do the same and to keep silent on what they witness before him. Yet on occasion he does not deny the label the 'Son of God', saying, "You have said it" (e.g., Mtt 26:63–64). The miraculous birth of Christ is, of course, indicative of his divinity for Christians, yet the Sufi of antiquity explored Jesus as "an absolutely extraordinary" individual who had no "genetic ties with God" (King, 1990, p. 83). Modern Sufi representations of Jesus are also distinctly non-Christian, though Jesus is made the absolute embodiment of 'love' and 'purity'. Dorothy Buck's (2006–2007) Sufi allusion to the Virgin Birth is worth noting. She describes Jesus as the love within oneself, conceived through one's own purity and with the end aim of crucifying the egoistic 'self' (*nafs*). Her combined Sufi interpretation of Mary as the embodiment of purity, and Jesus as the embodiment of love, here creates a typology for spiritual transformation. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus additionally has its place in Christ's Sufi representation. The Qur'anic account states that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is false, asserting that he did not suffer and die on the cross in order to be resurrected. The *Qur'an* maintains, nonetheless, that Jesus ascended to heaven.[4]

To fully grasp the significance of a Sufi reading of these events, it is necessary to draw a brief comparison between the Passion of Jesus and the so-called 'passion' of al-Hallaj (Arberry, 1983, p. 264).[5] The Qur'anic passage reads as follows (4:157–158):

> They declared: "We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did. Those that disagreed about him were in doubt concerning

> him; they knew nothing about him that was not sheer conjecture; they did not slay him for certain. God lifted him up to Him; God is mighty and wise.[6]

The *surah* is adamant that Jesus was not killed, "but so it was made to appear to them […]". It goes on to stress the point: "for a surety they killed him not. No, Allah raised him to Himself" (4:157). Bearing this in mind, Attar's account of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj relates that each time a limb was taken from al-Hallaj he praised his executioners for bringing him closer to God (Arberry, 1983, p. 270).[7] In summary, they tortured, crucified, burnt, and cast his ashes into the Tigris, but the suggestion repeatedly made by Attar is that they did not kill him, for from every one of his limbs (and afterwards from his ashes) came the cry: "I am the Truth" (Arberry, 1983, p. 271). Attar's account of the Passion, in which the suffering Christ and the figure of al-Hallaj can be easily transposed, offers interesting challenges to the literal reading of the Qur'anic passage when the account is taken purely as anecdotal.

When reading Attar's account, furthermore, the Sufi representation of Jesus is considerably different to the Christian (and also to the Muslim). Since the Sufi account merely offers a mystical rendering of the crucifixion, there is no real or even literal sense of the resurrection at play. The Sufi rendition of the Qur'anic passage thus provides a closer reading of its intended meaning. For instance, the Sufi could read the Qur'anic account of Jesus' Ascension symbolically to mean that Christ cannot be killed at the hands of his enemies, as this suggests that the 'Word' and 'Spirit' of God can be destroyed at the hands of His creatures. The literal Muslim reading of the passage brings to mind the criticism that John of Damascus brought against Islam: that it was a poorly understood version of Christian 'truth'.[8] Within the Sufi tradition, therefore, a trace of an alternative religious consciousness seems to have come alive and was allowed to thrive. There is thus a likely correspondence between the Passion of al-Hallaj and the Passion of Jesus, since al-Hallaj too was a historical entity that actually did suffer the atrocities so vividly described by Attar (Massignon, 1994, pp. 280–292).[9] Moreover, Massignon was confident that al-Hallaj had deliberately intended to re-enact a Christ-like scenario that he publicly declared in Baghdad, vowing "to seek death in the holy war of divine love – thirteen years, at least, prior to his execution" (Massignon, 1994, p. xvii).

Sufi materials yield an overwhelming number of references made to Jesus, which include both the image of the Muslim Jesus (the Prophet and Messiah) as well as distinct Christian citations (Christ and the Spirit of God). Here I have attempted to analyse the overarching representation of Jesus in Islamic mysticism, to demonstrate that Sufism sits firmly within the Islamic worldview, and more importantly to illustrate the mystical view as discerned from its Christian counterpart. Through an examination of the 'Sufi Jesus', an image of Jesus in Islamic and Sufi literature is revealed.

The doctrine of love becomes for Sufism a "creative symbolic process"[10] that preserves within it the experience of birth, death, and union, all of which are manifested in the doctrine of the 'Perfect Man'. Jesus is placed among the ranks of 'perfect men', the Islamic prophets, of whom Muhammad is the most perfect. For the Sufis, Jesus is undeniably a Muslim made into the literary emblem of mystical virtues. The 'Sufi Jesus' is thus the mystical configuration of the Qur'anic Jesus,

an account deemed superior to biblical exegesis. Although there are instances in which descriptions of the Christian Jesus finds its way into Sufi works, all Sufi representations of Christ conform to Islamic doctrine that seem to touch the very limits of Islamic representation; Sufi representations of Jesus are indeed surprising to both the Muslim and Christian. This is where Jesus is presented as a redemptive figure of cosmic proportions, albeit one whose 'extraordinariness' is not taken as a marker of exclusivity. Within limits, the 'Sufi Jesus' can indeed serve as a diplomatic avenue for religious dialogue in the current climate, but it remains that the medieval Sufi was more likely interested in conversion than mutual discourse.

At the heart of Sufi literature, Jesus is the figurative expression of a real transformative event – *annihilation and subsistence in God*. Jesus becomes part of the mystical experience in such a way that facilitates the process of 'exchange' between God and Man. The works of Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi resonate with this mystically charged Jesus where the notion of a 'Sufi Jesus' is fully brought to bear. With the literary appropriation of al-Hallaj, the Sufis perpetuate the spiritual biography of Jesus as the *martyr of love*.

My reference to the notion of a conceived 'Sufi Jesus' is a reflection based upon the composite make-up of literary references made about Jesus over time by the Sufis, and their acknowledgement of Him, albeit in their own unique envisagement of His qualities and characteristics. It is in relation to this unique Sufi mystical amalgamation of Muslim and Christian images of Jesus that I have drawn attention to the potential role of Sufism, as broadly conceived, in facilitating a distinct politics of mediation through the use of the figure of 'Jesus'. In addition, I have drawn on specific case studies of medieval figures that are each paragons of social and religious cohesion, namely: Rumi, Ibn al-'Arabi, and al-Hallaj. Each figure is representative of a culturally rich and religiously diverse environment in which Sufism was practiced and thrived. These examples also help to expose the impact of Sufism on society across a time period of roughly 300 years, and covering the breadth of the Muslim empire of that time. The areas in question are, respectively, the prominent and thriving mediaeval Muslim societies of both the western and eastern Muslim world.

Appendix: the crucifixion of al-Hallaj[11]

It is attested that it was in fact from fear of a riot, in which the Caliph (who was, in reality, prodded by Hamid) shouted, "Kill him, or beat him with sticks until he retracts". They beat him with sticks 300 times. At each blow, a clear voice was heard saying, "Do not be afraid, son of Mansour!" Then they took him out to be crucified. Weighed down with thirteen chains, al-Hallaj strutted proudly, waving his hands in the air like a beggar. "Why do you stand so proudly?" they asked him. "Because I am on my way to the slaughterhouse", he answered. The description that follows includes details of his apparel (loincloth, and a mantle over his shoulders), his prayer towards Mecca, his communing with God, his ascent onto the gibbet, and his acceptance of death as a sign of the crowd's "belief in one God to uphold the strictness of the Law". He was then stoned by the crowd. The

executioners cut off his hands, then his feet, then they plucked out his eyes; he was stoned again, then they cut off his ears and nose. He uttered his forgiveness of them as they were preparing to cut out his tongue. An old woman shouted, "what right has this little woolcarder (*al-hallaj*) to speak of God?"; thereafter, he uttered "It is enough for the lover to (diminish himself) before the uniqueness of the One". Then his tongue was cut out, and, finally, he was beheaded at the time of the evening prayer. The next day his limbs were burned and his ashes thrown into the Tigris.

Notes

1 Parts of this chapter are extracted from an earlier publication (Milani, 2012a).
2 The Sufi *dhikr* ('remembrance') is a specific Sufi practice that involves the combination of breathing techniques with the recitation of (one of) God's names.
3 Known to the West as 'dervish', the term literally means 'poor' but carries spiritual connotations in that one is absent from the world but present in God. 'Spiritual poverty' is a common rendering among modern Sufis (see Shaki and Algar, 1996, pp. 72–76).
4 On the crucifixion of Jesus in the *Qur'an* and Islamic thought, see Lawson (2009). Lawson's study offers a thorough examination of the singular Qur'anic verse (4:157–158) concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. See also, Robinson (n.d.) on the Muslim evidence for the death of Jesus. The exegesis of early Christian sects is that there was a substitute, that Jesus never had a physical body, and that he merely appeared in human form. These are the Basilidan, Docetic, and Marcionite views, respectively. For a summary on the opinions of the Christian sects on the crucifixion, see Stork (2002, p. 161). For example, the line from the verse: *but they thought they did* can be read literally as "he was made to resemble another for them". The former rendering is found in both Stork (2002, p. 160) and in Dawood's translation (2003, p. 76).
5 For the Persian see, Salmasizadeh (2003, pp. 606–613). On the life, teachings, and death of al-Hallaj, see Massignon (1994). It was Massignon who made a special case of the 'Christ-like' resemblance of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj, which he dubbed as "The Passion of Hallaj".
6 From Dawood's translation (2003, p. 76).
7 See Appendix for my abbreviation of Hallaj's 'Passion'.
8 See St John of Damascus, *Fount of Knowledge*, part 2, on the heresy of the Ishmailites.
9 On the study of the historicity of Jesus, see Gunther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1995).
10 See Urubshurow, 'Heirophanic History' (1997, p. 24).
11 My abbreviation of Attar's account. See Arberry (1983, pp. 268–271).

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8 Sufi politics in contemporary global society[1]

I have referred to Sufism as a third-force-conduit both within Islam and in relation to other religious, social and political agents. Inside the world of Islam, Sufism is an alternative to the mainstream. Yet it also has an 'ecumenical' function in that environment as a moderator of sectarian division, especially the predominant Sunni and Shia schism. Sufism has a similar utility in relation to the non-Muslim world, apart from the fact that its sole aim is to represent Islamic values. There is also a special way in which I have referred to Sufism as a 'third' (and alternative) approach to interpreting the Islamic past. These are important, and they have been, to a good degree, discussed in the previous chapters in relation to historical and hermeneutical positioning of Sufism in the Muslim world. Moving into the contemporary setting, in this chapter, I place the focus on Sufism as a 'third social force' in interfaith activity between Muslim and non-Muslim relations. I do this with examples drawn from contemporary Sufi orders based in the Asian continent, that include, but are not restricted to, political involvement.

Sufism in modernity

The social anthropologist, Michael Gilsenan, showed that Sufi orders were changing, and not disappearing, because of "functional differentiation as a core aspect of modernity" (Bruinessen, 2009, p. 140). The orders were becoming more complex to respond to variation in the changing environment of modernity, since specialised modern institutions were now fulfilling the variety of social, economic, and educational functions that Sufi orders may have previously served. The general impression is that Sufism had positioned itself as an alternative to political Islam (Gilsenan, 1982, pp. 229–250; Hoffman, 1995; Johansen, 1996; Chih, 2000), presenting itself as quietist. Yet, it has in fact been actively engaged in the affairs of the world in its own response to the challenge of modernity. As mystics, Sufis represent the in-between of theistic and secular expressions of Islam, which allows them to manoeuvre traditionalist and modernist attitudes with greater precision compared to Salafists, for example. Sufi organisational networks, such as the Nimatullahi and Naqshbandi, currently manage diasporic communities, new converts to Islam (via Sufism), all of which is coordinated by leadership abroad in the country of origin. Thus, the role of the *khaneqah*, or Sufi centres, remains vital

to a better understanding of Sufism within the landscape of contemporary western society. The reason for this, as earlier outlined, is that Sufi networks are interconnected and representative as extensions of their homeland in Asia.

This chapter examines a prominent Sufi order, which has its roots in fourteenth-century Iran. The Nimatullahi Sufi order has thrived in modernity through the ways that the order's leader has met the challenges posed by the era. This case study is demonstrative of Sufi social activity and Sufi political motivations. A closer observation of a longstanding Sufi order will also reveal important information about the extent to which we see change in Sufi history as a form of social cohesion, and, furthermore, to what extent this impinges upon its traditional foundations. The following will be an examination of various modern interpretations about the role of Sufism in society and politics.

Sociology of Sufism in the modern period

There are today many expressions of Sufism. These appear to be engaged with society. Yet they have maintained a sense of balance in navigating the modern world in which they find themselves. The orders are everywhere observed as actively interacting with social change and diversity, while retaining their rootedness within the Islamic tradition (Henkel, 2009). This is a distinct Sufi trait. Henkel's study of a Turkish Naqshbandiya order shows how 'Sufi Islam' can succeed in engaging in and with modern society without losing its footing in the sources of Islam.

'Sufi Islam' is a reference to the discussion in the previous chapter about the Sufis and 'their (version of) Islam'. Recall that for centuries the Sufis have refined a particular understanding of Islam that is profoundly experiential. The Sufis have not historically been absent from the political arena, but over time the orders have felt the sting of politics. Today, most members of Sufi groups are reluctant to speak about their experience in the context of politics. 'Politics' has become taboo and a signifier that carries unwanted stigma. I want to take a closer look at the issue.

Sufi orders have historically engaged the society in which they were to reside. They continue to do so today, especially during times of change. There is a concern with Henkel's use of 'Sufi Islam' since it gives the impression that there exists a distinction between 'Islam' and 'Sufism', which, of course, there is not. Sufism and Islam are inseparable. Nevertheless, it is important in that it signals the attention that Sufism has received in the West, and in having the intent to distinguish Sufism from extremist (and/or political) Islam. My concern with this kind of approach is that there is an unnecessary emphasis placed on Sufism as a political medium for easing exchanges between East and West. The worry is that not enough attention is paid to the fact that mysticism is being used for political gain. And furthermore, missing the point that political Sufism defines the activity of actual Sufis or Sufi orders engaged in political activity. It might very well be that the notion of political Sufism could impact the life force of Sufism in the West negatively, in the same way that political Islam has affected the perception of Islam and Muslims in the West. But neither is, as I mentioned in chapter five, necessarily

linked to violence or extremism. My interpretation of political Sufism asserts it as much more than the narrow sense of political mediation. Rather, Sufism *is* political by nature, in the broader sense, because it is Islamic. Whether it is engaged in theological discourse, diplomatic endeavours, or the social exchange of ideas, it is never separate to Islam, but differentiated from other modes of being Islamic (Ahmed, 2016). In the case of Pakistan, the construction of a political Sufi identity has served to redefine the boundaries of Sufism and Islam. Yet this is a top-down political utilisation of Sufism which seeks to differentiate Sufism as a core expression of a peaceful Islam that is distanced from negative political brandings such as 'fundamentalism' or 'political Islam' (Zubaida, 1993). Using the above, I want to make the distinction between the 'politics of Sufism' and 'political Sufism'. The former is about presenting Sufism as a tolerant and peaceful expression of Islam; an expression that is 'true' to the essence of the person of Muhammad and the teachings of the Qur'an. The latter is about conveying the realities of the Sufi movement as a living interpretation of Islamic polity. Zubaida's reading might pose the problem of implicating Islam. Whereas, the emphasis should be on the fact that Sufism is a 'reading' of Islam. Islam and Sufism should not be seen as two separate entities. As a political tool in a modern setting, Sufism is typically cast as the 'soft face' of Islam, presenting a message of love, tolerance, and a universal brotherhood, active in liberating religious thought from rigid orthodoxy imposed by certain *ulama* (Drage, 2012).

Sufism is best viewed as a 'third force'. This is a theory engaged by Heelas (2011), though in his interpretation, defining Sufism as differing from two other "sources of force", he asserts Sufism as the middle ground and the alternative to the secular and conservative/radical Islamic traditions. Following the emphasis that contemporary discourse has placed on Sufism as conveying an inherent universalism, Heelas forwards the notion of Sufism as a "cosmopolitan piety" (Heelas, 2011). He perceives Sufism as a "spiritual humanism of humanity" (Heelas, 2011), supported by certain expressions of Sufi spirituality that are removed from a traditional standpoint, but still immersed in the politics of their time: "Destroy the mosque! Destroy the temple! Destroy whatever you please. Do not break the human heart, for God dwells therein!" (Bulleh Shah). Heelas brings to the fore a contemporary manifestation of Sufism that has redefined itself in the light of the virtues of cosmopolitanism and humanism. Granted humanistic qualities are 'natural' to Sufism, it does not presuppose their exclusivity to Sufism, nor their absence in Islam.[2] Heelas makes the point about the ever-present individual or communal dissatisfaction with the religious mainstream regarding virulent dogmatism, prejudice, and intolerance, which extend from corrupt religious institutions. In this way, Sufism has helped to offer those dissatisfied with mainstream religiosity to retain their faith through the Sufi interpretation of Islam. Such impressions have given credence to the label 'Sufi Islam', and thus the false perception of Sufism as separate to Islam. It is a question of proximity in the spectrum of the mainstream that defines where each Sufi or Sufi order stands within the Islamic tradition. In this, those in the tradition of Bulleh Shah, for example, remain well distanced from the mainstream, but not separate to Islam.

The spectrum is indicative of Sufi political thought, and a marker of its positioning on matters in response to the tensions within Islam in modernity.

Sufism as third-force spirituality

Points of tensions can be singled out with respect to the broader processes of modernisation, westernisation, and secularisation. Major changes throughout the 'Muslim world', such as the creation of the modern nation state accompanied by the rise of nationalism, after the Great Wars, created new opportunities, but also challenges for Muslim-majority countries with a population bias toward Islamic governance. Muslim-majority nations did embark on projects of Islamic modernity, but resistance to westernisation and secularisation produced tensions due to rising suspicions about foreign encroachment upon the Muslim way of life. Certain branches of Sufis who had adapted to modernisation processes thrived during this era, some, like the Nimatullahis, receiving state patronage during the Pahlavi regime (Van den Bos, 2002), but others suffered criticism by the intelligentsia who perceived Sufism as a thing of the past (Ridgeon, 2011). In both cases, however, Sufism presented itself as a third force with respect to the newly faced challenges of modernity. The way that the Sufis eventually positioned themselves during this period redefined their proximity to the mainstream for a new age.

Trimingham (1998, p. 250) argued that the decline of Sufi orders was due to a combined effect imposed by the *ulama*, Salafi fundamentalists, secularised 'new men', and by changes that affected the social and religious climate. To some extent he was right. The rise of new associations of the Islamist persuasion like that of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, had taken over much of the functions of the Sufi orders in Egypt where Sufism was ultimately outlawed. However, most Sufi orders had begun to adapt to these changes, and they were becoming "more visibly present and politically significant". One of the ways they did this was by exporting Sufism to the West where they successfully founded networks and attracted followers. The Sufi orders "found fertile soil in the West, among both Muslim immigrant populations and Western converts (or unconverted Westerners)" (Bruinessen, 2009, p. 135), which was both a demonstration of resilience and adaptability of organised Sufism. Gilsenan's study (1967) of an Egyptian (urban) Sufi order, the Hamidiya Shadhiliya, shed light on the effectiveness of organised Sufism and the role of the Sufi orders in the modern world.

The assumption that secularisation would spell the end of old world religions and usher in a new enlightenment was thwarted in what transpired as a sacralisation response through Islamic revivalism, Pentecostalism, and mystical and spiritual movements, such as Sufism. For instance, Geertz (1968) and Gellner (1981) held the kind of linear secularisation theory that focused on the general disenchantment of the world. For them Sufism and its eccentricities, such as saint-worship, miracles, magic, and ecstatic states, was an indication of its demotion "to a pre-modern expression of religiosity within an indefinite movement toward a more rational, and therefore, more modern religious expression with scholarly Islam" (Milani, 2015). Contrary to this, Gilsenan discovered the orders were defining their service

to society through the gaps of modern institutions. The shortcomings of modern society through secularisation helped the Sufis to carve out their own project to revive spirituality. As harbingers of the mysteries of the religion, their role became increasingly defined as the alternative to religious fundamentalism and radicalisation, both equally products of modernism. Frederick de Jong's study of the Sufi orders (1974, cited in Bruinessen, 2009, p. 141) showed the relationship between state patronage and bureaucratisation, arguing the orders were also involved in a process of bureaucratisation and formalisation that had initially secured state patronage (Bruinessen, 2009, p. 141). The two were not mutually exclusive in Sufi history, and could perhaps be indicators of how Sufism could further embed itself on foreign soil, receiving the full support of the state.

Sufi literary productions are another point of reference for understanding Sufi activity in the western context. Such tensions, as mentioned earlier, are often skilfully negotiated by Sufi teachers in the choice of certain methods over others that may be more conducive to managing difference (Hermansen, 2006, p. 43). Hermansen (2006) concluded that the universal western Sufi orders that encourage a comparative approach uphold a delicate balance between the desire of advocates to retain traditional roots and maintain modern context. Such an effort is generally observable in the literary works of western Sufi orders that express a synthesis of traditional authenticity and contemporary western needs in their approach. Among the western Sufis that have defined their method through the field of psychotherapy, they have adapted classical Sufism to scientific, new age, comparative religionist, and even psychological models of praxis. Members of western Sufi movements are also varied in their manifestation, since they are made up of those with different needs and those who hold a diverse relationship to the Islamic past. Some of those identified in Hermansen's study include: "Islamic" (hybrid), "New Age" (perennials), or "immigrant" (transparent), each of which are partial to literary expressions that fit their own orientation (2006, p. 44).

Many are not the traditionalist standards of Sufis or Sufi orders, and many have metamorphosed out of their conventional identity. The landscape of Sufism in the West is made up of a spectrum of Sufi types that range from the 'softer' liberal cosmopolitan face of Islam to the traditionalist conservative kind that can scarcely be delineated from mainstream Islamic fundamentalism. What we are left with is a diverse manifestation of Sufic expressions based on orientation. Whether mystics with liberal attitudes or fundamentalists who see themselves as spiritual, there is a contradictory array of Sufi expression, ranging from "a space to articulate anti-modernist or even apocalyptic and militant themes" to considering "the embrace of a progressive agenda of pluralism, non-violence, feminism and the unity of mystical experience" (Hermansen, 2006, p. 44).

Sufism in transition from Asia to the world

The Nimatullahi Sufi order has an established global network that started in Iran and transitioned to the West. Its tradition keeps its cultural ties but caters to the needs of its non-Muslim, non-Iranian converts. The order was founded in

the fourteenth century by Shah Nimatullah Wali (1330–1431) (Graham, 1999a; Calder et al., 2003, pp. 262–268), but was forced to relocate to the Deccan (India), returning to Iran by the end of the eighteenth century in what Graham has noted as a renaissance of Nimatullahi Sufism (1999b, pp. 167–168). The order divided into three sub-branches out of which the Monawwar Ali Shahi has had the greatest success outside of Iran. This has mainly been due to the efforts of the leadership of Javad Nurbakhsh (1926–2008) who took up the position of 'master' in 1956. Nurbakhsh tirelessly worked to promote Sufism in his lifetime, in Iran, and then after the 1979 Revolution, in the US and UK. In this process, Nurbakhsh was to make a number of significant changes by the late 1990s, and after September 11, the order further distanced itself from establishment Islam. Nurbakhsh was a psychiatrist by profession, in Tehran, and this influence would leave an indelible mark on the Sufism he espoused. His Sufism was dubbed a 'progressive spirituality'. The change of direction prompted by Nurbakhsh was not without consequence. Many of his supporters defected. Abroad, the order is officially known as the Khaniqahi Nematullahi Sufi Order (Lewisohn, 2006, p. 66, n. 19), and its headquarters are today located in the UK, where the current master, Alireza Nurbakhsh, Javad's son and successor, resides.

In Iran, prior to the Revolution, Nurbakhsh's Sufism catered to the members of Tehran's high society during a time when a certain type of liberal Sufism was becoming fashionable. He further capitalised on the foreign market of interest in the US and UK by setting up Khaniqahs (or Sufi centres) abroad for those who had become interested in the order whilst living in Iran (Spellman, 2004, p. 110). Part of the rapid growth of his Sufi order was a direct result of the emerging interest in Eastern spirituality in America and western Europe specifically (Spellman, 2004). Broadly speaking, Nurbakhsh's *progressivism* was not original, but rather symptomatic of an emerging current of spiritualism across the West. This brand of Sufism is, in effect, a reconstruction by Nurbakhsh for the contemporary age and facilitated the national agenda for education and social reform under the Shah administration. The 1979 Revolution, and subsequent regime change, re-issued a conservative agenda, and interest fell to traditional and conservative Sharia-based Sufism, if at all, leaving Nurbakhsh in a vulnerable position. The legacy of Nurbakhsh is twofold: his aim to redefine the relationship of Sufism to Islam, and his psychology of Sufism. The former concerns the cultural context of Sufism, while the latter, its psychological methods. The two are connected in his life's work to reposition, and to redefine, 'Sufism' as a moral spirituality that had deep roots in Iranian antiquity.

Nurbakhsh was a prolific author. Lewisohn notes that he was an "intellectually formidable Persian Sufi master", whose publications in Persian are now mostly available in English (2006, p. 56–60). Nurbakhsh championed the view that Sufism was innately Iranian and evolved out of native Persian mysticism. He also believed that humanitarian principles of Sufism were a "quintessentially Iranian cultural phenomenon" (Lewisohn, 2006, p. 56). Nurbakhsh was undoubtedly involved in the creation of a myth-history (Milani, 2014). It was part of an effort to nationalise Sufism to attract those who were fed up with the excesses of

the Mullahs in post-revolutionary Iran. Admittedly, Nurbakhsh's assertions about the pre-Islamic and Iranian roots of Sufism are inspired by the literary masterpiece of Firdausi, the *Shahnameh* or Book of Kings published in the eleventh century.[3]

For Nurbakhsh, Sufism was a process of Islamisation of the native Iranian mysticism in specific regions of Persia. By his reckoning, the name 'Sufi' only came into prominence when Iranian masters accepted Islam the ensuing centuries after the conquests (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 13; Milani, 2012). Firdawsi's epic tale of the kings of Iran served as the catalyst, lining up the Sufis with the ancient divine right of kings. Combined with the Illuminationist philosophy of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, Nurbakhsh purported an unbroken line of Persian prophet-kings that became Sufi saints, who hailed from the region of Khurasan, northeastern Iran. Thus emerged an imagined Khurasanian Sufi tradition. The province of Khurasan was, for Nurbakhsh, the fertile soil of 'true' Sufism. Nurbakhsh understood the non-Iranian elements of Sufism, such as the doctrine of 'trust in God' (*tavakkol*) and asceticism (*zuhd*), as linked to Egyptian and Syrian Christianity, and explained the 'doctrine of activity' and 'social exertion' (*kasb*, *amal*) as sourced in the pre-Islamic Khurasanian experience.[4] The province of Khursan was the furthest outpost from Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids, and, as such, this region retains its symbolic pride of place in Nurbakhsh's historical imagination as embodiment of the anti-establishment, and also in adding to his nationalistic agenda.[5] The Nimatullahi are indeed a socially and politically savvy Sufi order, notes Lewisohn, an expert on Nimatullahi history. Their chauvinist advocacy of Iranian nationalism was Nurbakhsh's legacy, and not necessarily representative of the Nimatullahi initiative (Lewisohn, 2006, p. 59). The fact is that most of his non-Iranian disciples remain unaware of the Persian agenda, and most do not concern themselves with this propaganda. For them, Nimatullahi Sufism is effectively a universal spirituality that is not confined to geographical borders (Milani, 2014).

Nurbakhsh's writings represent a formidable modern interpretation of Sufism. The devil is in the detail, and the detail confirms something about Nurbakhsh's predilection for the kind of 'Sufism' that he espoused. Nurbakhsh was not a historian; nor was he a scholar. The 'Sufism' of Nurbakhsh was not Sufism per se. It reflected the predominance of pre-Sufi pietist groups that resided in the northeast of Iran in the province of Khurasan. Their brand of spiritual piety was eventually integrated into the Sufi movement once it extended its authority in Khurasan from Baghdad. There is more than meets the eye to the politics of Sufism in the mind of Nurbakhsh.

The world of eighth-century Islam was the time of the Umayyad period. This is the period of the frontier fighters that wore wool, fought against infidels, and spent the remainder of their time in prayer, meditation, and conversation with those of the other great faith traditions. The world of ninth-century Islam was the time of the Abbasid period. This period contained a growing number of ascetic and monastic movements that populated the urban centres of Baghdad and Khurasan. Baghdad has its special history wherein the variety of religious and 'spiritual athletes' (Bulliet, 1994) and their followers contributed to the general religious ethos of the region. Combined with the political, social, and economic stresses of a

melting pot, Baghdad produces Sufism proper; that is, a mystical movement that was eventually aligned with the rising Sunni orthodoxy. It is this brand of Sufism which is widely accepted as authentic Sufism and which spreads to Khurasan and replaces local spiritual movements there.

If we were to place Nurbakhsh's efforts into their historical context, we would have to focus on Khurasan as the backdrop to Nurbakhsh's Sufism. It is in this out-of-reach northeastern region that a brand of Khurasani renunciates and their movements flourished. There are two such groups that relate directly to the 'Sufi' consciousness of Nurbakhsh: the Karramiyya and the Malamatiyya. But the latter, the Karramiyya, were a movement of the local classes, known for their rigorous asceticism (nicknamed 'mortifiers' based on their strict austerities) and their influential monastic communities were important for conversion of the local community of *dhimmis* or those who paid the religious tax to be permitted to practice their own religion. The Malamatiyya, as the second movement to develop in Khurasan, were the 'blame seekers', also reflecting their distinctive habitual practice. They were particularly opposed to the Sufis emanating from Baghdad. They were also opposed to the local Karramiyya for their showiness and public display of piety, which was seen by the Malamatiyya as an obstacle to true piety.

In contrast, the Malamatiyya sought to bring themselves closer to God by destroying their egos (*nafs*) through the avoidance of public display. They instead subjected themselves deliberately to self-humiliating instances that attracted blameworthiness. They held many points in common with the Sufis of Baghdad, such as avoiding public displays of piety, controlling the *nafs*, but, unlike them, they believed that the *nafs* could not be destroyed and they argued that any such expression of accomplishment was evidence to the contrary. This is a point that is especially pronounced in the works of Nurbaksh about the pretence of 'the religious'. The Malamatiyya were sceptical about the claims of Sufis destroying their lower selves and then taking this as a right to claim their closeness to God. Furthermore, the Malamatiyya signature practice of avoiding public piety precluded them from moralising in public and commanding the good, which the Karramiyya and the Sufis did, and which connected the Sufis to the emerging Sunni mainstream. Such an attitude was yet another salient feature of Nurbakhsh's Sufi poetry divulging religious hypocrisy. We can also talk about a third aristocratic movement in Balkh and Tirmidh, which had its influence on the interpretation of Nurbakhsh, especially about Firdausi's epic. The movement was known as the Hakims, 'Wise Men'. They were less influential than the previous two, but nevertheless important.

The eventual change that comes about with the success of the Sufis from Iraq is connected to the deeper Islamisation of society through the achievements of urbanisation processes and conversion to Islam that secured permanent settlement on the peripheries of the Muslim empire. The Sufis were an important instrument for the spread of Islamisation. Social and political change favoured the new spiritual elite, the Sufis, and it was a change for which the renunciates and frontier warriors were no longer appropriate. The point that remains is that Nurbakhsh was a spiritual revivalist who, despite lacking in academic skills, was intuitively

on course to resuscitate a spiritual mechanism that was strictly divorced from mainstream interests. In this, his ministry was definitive of a political Sufism and clearly an indication of Sufi political intervention. Nurbakhsh had openly declared his affinity with the *malamati* approach, which was well known by his close companions; it was later made public in the manner of his responses to a final recorded interview on 'Sufism' (Smith, 2008a, 2008b).

'Nurbakhshian Sufism'

The career of Javad Nurbakhsh is a good example of a charismatic Sufi sheikh. Using his influence, Nurbakhsh managed to shift the direction of a largely conservative Nimatullahi attitude toward a secular project that stood in the face of dogmatic religious elements in Iran, and later abroad (Milani and Possamai, 2016, p. 7). The Sufism of Nurbakhsh explores the lofty ideals of Sufism beyond the limitations of Islamic orthodoxy and grounded in a psychological understanding. There is a touch of the new age to this reinvention of Sufism by Nurbakhsh, but at its core it is politically motivated, and aimed at ascertaining 'capital' to balance the odds in favour of the oppressed. The 'oppressed' are dissidents of the old regime that lost the socio-political battle to an overwhelming desire of the people to overthrow the Shah and his modernist project and install Khomeni as the leader of a legitimate Islamic state. In the West, therefore, the faction in favour of modernist and progressive ideals reformulated its identity under the banner of the 'Khaniqahi Nimatullahi' order led by Nurbakhsh. This faction attracted wide global interest, and Nurbakhsh was successful in reaching both Iranian and non-Iranian adherents (Lewisohn, 2006; Graham, 1999b; Quinn, 1999).

Sufi ideas about altruism and universalism did not emerge in a vacuum. The Sufi publications of Javad Nurbakhsh during the 1990s are an excellent point of reference in this regard. These are also a good example of the modern history of Sufism through the Nimatullahi order under Nurbakhsh's leadership. These publications are important because they address the juncture of religion and politics, embodying an authentic Sufi response to modern world problems. Nurbakhsh's writings demonstrate the strains of domestic politics upon the liberal interpretation of Islam, and the need for Iranian Sufis to seek sanctuary within western democratic societies. Sufism generally enjoys a positive representation in the West in its popularised form. While Sufism is promoted as the 'heart' of Islam, advocates of Muslim orthodoxy quite often see the nature of Sufi practice and its belief system as a contentious issue. For instance, some of these concerns can pertain to the Sufis' devotion to the master of the path (*pir-e tariqat*), the idea of spiritual transformation (*fana va baqa*), or the incorporation of music or visual art.

Nurbakhshian Sufism is tightly interwoven with the duration of his time as head of the Nimatullahi order. To appreciate this unveiling of his attitude toward religion, God, and ultimately the Sufi path itself, it is important to consider the variety of resources that are presently available. Here, I draw on excerpts from some of his books, a face-to-face exclusive interview recorded and published online, and time spent among the Nimatullahis (Milani and Possamai, 2016). Nurbakhsh's

position is one of a moral spiritual 'non-theism': a tendency to *not* disavow God, yet maintaining the prohibition to invoke Him for the sake of reaching its *truth* (Pourjavady and Wilson, 1978, pp. 224–225). This was the *Malamatiyya* tendency of Nurbakhsh's practice: the preference for internal piety. My use of 'non-theism' is to underline the distinction Nurbakhsh makes between mystical understandings of God from theological readings. In several instances Nurbakhsh has expressed that Sufism has nothing to do with religion (Smith, 2008a), and by extension the *God* of the Sufi similarly has nothing to do with the 'God' of biblical tradition (Nurbakhsh, 1996, pp. 32–34). Yet Nurbakhsh's writings are never without reference to God or a sense of God's presence behind the symbolic language he employs. However, what remains consistent in his writings is a demarcation of 'Sufism', as he no doubt sees it, from Islam. The narrative of Nurbakhsh tells the story that Sufism had parted ways with the Islamic religion long ago, a fact that Nurbakhsh is only now making explicit (Smith, 2008a; Forum, 2007). Indeed, he has said that Sufism existed prior to Islam, and it is with the arrival of Islam to Iran that the Sufis accepted Islam and continued to practice the ancient spiritual tradition in its new form (Nurbakhsh, 1996).

The works of Nurbakhsh, particularly many of his prominent discourses (Nurbakhsh, 1996), are heavily centred on the notion of chivalry or *javanmardi*. Chivalry is a consistent theme through his writings through which the virtues of altruism are heavily promoted, often at the expense of religious praxis and conformism. At times, the faith-based element of his style of Sufism seems to be an unremitting faith in the 'master' – recalling lines from Hafez such as: *be mey sajjadeh rangin kon garat pir-e moghan gooyad* ("stain the prayer rug with wine should the master command you"). Selections from his poems "Feigning negligence", "Love's bazaar", "Love's treasure", and many others, reinforce the view that religion is a mere barrier to God, and that God is not that which is conventionally divulged by representatives of religion (Nurbakhsh, 1980). In *The psychology of Sufism* (1992), in particular, Nurbakhsh offers a highly technical psychological explanation of the process of spiritual transformation from a state of ego-centeredness to spirit-consciousness without recourse to religion. Nurbakhsh's 'theology', therefore, does not advocate the conventional view of the divine, but rather the divine as manifest in humane virtues. This is a central point in his Sufism, and it is powerfully demonstrated in his works through heavy dependence on the classic theme of self-realisation that is arrived at through the complete destruction of the ego. The aim of Sufism, as Nurbakhsh proclaims it, is purely epitomised in civil etiquette (*adab*) and moral duty (*khedmat*) (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 51), and this is consistently visible across his works.

The motivation behind Nurbakhsh's Sufism is the politics of the age, whereby his post-revolution work was a bid to maintain the sense of freedom of religion that was enjoyed prior to the Islamist regime. Nurbakhsh's circumstances were not the first of their kind in the history of Sufism. The founder of the Nimatullahi order, Shah Nimatullah Wali, to which Nurbakhsh is a claimant, was also forced into exile due to political pressures and the arousal of suspicions of heresy spurred by a rival Sufi faction (Graham, 1999b). The *Discourses*, therefore, take pains to

illustrate the frustration with religious authorities, and the means to offer individuals a degree of flexibility and accountability of conscience. For example, Nurbakhsh says: "The Sufi's love of God involves no expectation of reward or fear of punishment, for the Sufi does not have any wishes and demands" (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 21). Again, he says, "Righteous action refers to acting with no thought of merit of reward" (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 16). The general tone of Nurbakhsh's progressive Sufism is, for good reason, muffled in the publications, and needs to be analysed carefully in the light of other factors. However, his own position is gradually disclosed in diaspora, as can be seen from the interview in 2008 and, prior to this, already visible in the Internet discussion threads about his decision to relinquish ties between Sufism and religion (Smith, 2008a, 2008b).

The case of the Nimatullahi may help explain the gradual transition of a traditional Sufi order that has been adapted for a global setting. On the one hand, the order holds a strong connection to its homeland, as seen by its reconstruction of a perceived or imagined history that is strongly contextualised within its Persian heritage. On the other hand, the order successfully caters to its non-Iranian followers throughout the world, and conforms to its environments wherever its Sufi monasteries are located (Milani, 2014). Previous studies on Sufism in the West have demonstrated that its orders and movements provide a variety of cultural articulations, which are compatible to the diversity of the post-modern and post-secular public sphere (Malik and Hinnells, 2006, p. 24). Sufism's alternative modes of articulation and diversity of interaction have made Islam appealing as both a spirituality and a culture to westerners. In such a way, it would be fair to say that Sufism is a positive 'force' within the current political climate, especially in the way that it offers a positive impression of Muslim culture. Indeed, per Jamal Malik, "Sufi immigration might have the potential to become one vehicle among others – for a more inclusive Western response to Muslims" (Malik and Hinnells, 2006, p. 25). Malik and Hinnells (2006, p. 25) cautions, however, about "grand" and "naive" attitudes that make too much of Sufism as the "symbol of tolerance and humanism in Islam, undogmatic, flexible and non-violent, not striving towards the establishment of a divine order". Nevertheless, it is worthwhile recalling that he concedes Sufism is a "potentially innovative and ingenious interacting medium" with its representatives capable of oscillating between "different social languages or consciousnesses" (Malik and Hinnells, 2006, p. 25).

Notes

1 This chapter is in part a reproduction of two publications by the author (Milani, 2017).
2 For further discussion on Islamic humanism see, Lenn E. Goodman's *Islamic humanism* (2003).
3 For further discussion on the Nimatullahi creed, see Milani (2014).
4 On the explanation of Nurbakhsh's narrative on Sufism, see Nawruziyan (1997a, 1997b, 2000).
5 For more on this, see the works of Abd al-Hossein Zarrinkub (1923–1999) and Richard Hartmann (Zarrinkub, 1978; Hartmann, 1916).

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9 The subtle body and the experience of politics in the human[1]

The world of Sufi experience is like a maze that is one part psychological and another utterly unknown; both felt fully in the body. So far as possible, this chapter will attempt to explain the bodily experience from records and the insights they betray about the experience of Sufism in the body. There are two quotes worth noting from the outset as definitive of the sentiment I am trying to portray. The first states, "I know God by God, and I know that which is not God by the light of God" (Imam Ali, cited in Nicholson, 1976, p. 269). The second quote even more radical, "It is God that opens and seals the heart of men" (Qur'an 39:23). Contained within the quotes is the very substance of the politics of Sufism. The first quote prescribes the experience of God, and what is not God, explaining what can be rationalised and experienced. The latter magnifies what cannot be known (but must be accepted), and that which can be experienced, but not rationalised. Together, the quotes outline the framework of the Sufi spiritual system of understanding and experiencing lived Sufism in the body. What is conveyed is final in defining the Sufi experience in the everyday. To this end, the Sufis devised a mystical system to elaborate their unique cosmogony of 'inward transcendence', which would in turn provide the Sufis with a legitimate independent mode of authority through the experience of religion in the body. The comprehensiveness of the Sufi system is, more importantly, also accompanied by the politics of the body. This entails the utilisation of fealty by the masters of the path to secure their position and power within the Muslim world. And, as such, the elaboration on the subtle body in Sufism, in this final chapter, entails a concluding examination of the proliferation of religion in the body as a means of political control. This final aspect of the Sufi political thought includes an elaboration on the subtle body as an indicator of growing Sufi independence in the politics of theology within Islam, and also as a method of guaranteeing subordination of its members to established Sufi organisations.

The subtle body in Sufism

This chapter is taking up the subtle body in the Islamic/Sufi traditions. It will clarify the place of subtle bodies in Islamic understanding through the lens of key Sufi thinkers from the ninth century to the modern time. Important to this work

are the early chroniclers of Sufi doctrine and praxis (who are also compliers of major works of Sufism) such as Hujwiri, Attar, and Rumi. This work will highlight important themes that are connected to the theory and practice of Sufism overall, but, more importantly, offer some degree of clarity on the subtle body as a feature of politics of the body in Sufism. The present examination will also pay close attention to the synthesising efforts and reformist impulse of the Sufis in the development of working theories of the subtle body.[2]

The subtle body system(s) in the Sufi tradition outline key methods documented in primary historical materials. The politics of the body in Sufism is based upon the use of these methods to regulate religious experience of a particular kind. The uses of certain techniques to control the body (and mind) play an important role in maintaining religious authority. I am focused on the experience of religion in body, not to be confused with a study of the experience of religion in the 'social body'. That is, the subject of examination is not the social behaviour of religious agents, but the religious incorporeality of social agents. Looking at the data phenomenologically does not exclude the sociological as a secondary cause. This is because I am seeking to pinpoint the impact of religion on the body prior to it becoming manifest in observable (religious) social behaviour. Such an approach was not alien to the 'sociological' method of Bourdieu and Foucault, because both were in search of *the reason*. Recall the former's assertion, "the body is the site of incorporated history" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 13; see also Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 437, 466–468). The politics of the body and the experience of the religious combined produce an established stimulus for power through control of bodily experience (*hexis*) defined by such forces. In Sufism, at least, there are three types of religious experience: experiential, ceremonial, and societal, all of which are innately tied in to the politics of power. The first is internally realised. The second is ritualistically performative and habitually manifest in individual or communal expressions of faith. The final type is socially manifest and part of the politics of social power. All are part of a tiered method of regulation of a particular politics of the body among the Sufi orders and the heads.

Early Islamic materials, on their own, tell us little in terms of an explicit reference to the 'subtle body'. What is known, however, can be gleaned from the Qur'an and hadith by way of the experiences of the Prophet Muhammad. Such an exercise no doubt required the mystical eye of certain early Muslim thinkers of Basra and Baghdad, such as Rabia, the female mystic, Tustari and Junayd, and his contemporaries. These Muslims sought to understand the inner meaning of their faith. The Sufis, as these pious men and women came to be called, developed systems of spiritual hierarchies made possible through contact with earlier systems (of Greek, Persian, Hermetic, and Indian philosophies).

From the time of the early Middle Ages the Sufis had the explicit idea that the 'subtle centres' were actually a series of co-existing psycho-spiritual 'bodies' that mediate between the material and transcendent realms (Buehler, 1998, p. 106). There is probably an important link between this notion and that of the spiritual 'double', which can be found in Plato's theory of the 'astral plane' (Plato, 2003) and the "astral body" incorporated by Theosophists and Rosicrucians. This idea

of a 'divine likeness' or 'twin' (popular among the Gnostics) is nevertheless timeless, since earlier instances of it can be found in the ancient Persian notion of *fravashi*, the divine 'guardian spirits' (Corbin, 1978, p. 32f). In connection, in later Islamic thought there developed the interesting notion that 'Muhammad', meaning 'worthy of praise' (Déclais, 2010, p. 501; esp. Guillaume, 1955, p. 104) was an allusion to the Paraclete. Even so, it is not difficult to interpret the 'mystical prophetology' of the Light of Muhammad as the connection with, and a continuum of, the divine essence (Schimmel, 1985, p. 125–126). In the same way, the Sufi master is seen as the worldly intercessor whose presence is deemed necessary for the activation of these centres.

Sufism is the mystical school of Islam whose tradition records the language and experience of those Muslims seeking intimacy and union with God. The past century has seen the popular growth of Sufism in the West, catering to the needs of westerners in search of alternative means of religion (Westerlund, 2004, p. 138). This movement has given rise to renewed (and broad) interpretations of Sufism that have set it apart from its traditional Islamic setting (Sedgwick, 2005, p. 846). As such, modern Sufism possesses its own unique view of the subtle body which will also be observed below.

The subtle body concept in the Qu'ran and beyond

The use of the subtle body or spiritual centres (*latâ'if*) in Sufism can be understood primarily as a theory of personhood and self-transformation (Hermansen, 1988, p. 1). The Sufi term *latîfa* (plural *latâ'if*) is derived from the Arabic word *latîf* meaning 'gentle', 'sensitive', or 'subtle', and in Sufi terminology describes the non-material component of the person capable of being influenced or 'awakened' through spiritual practices (Hermansen, 1988, p. 1). However, a coherent vision of the subtle body in Sufism is often difficult to ascertain. From what can be deduced, there are two ways we can understand the subtle body in Sufism: the perfection and ascent of the soul, and the psychological 'mapping' of the human consciousness; both are suggested in the Qur'an. The Qur'an talks about the soul or *nafs* and describes three stages of the soul's transformation (12:53, 75:2, 89:27); the hadith literature presents a quasi-notion of an astral body (most likely the soul) that leaves the body in its ascent of the heavens – this recounts the Prophet's night ascension (*isra* and *mi'raj*), also alluded to in the Qur'an (17:1, 81:19–25, 53:12–18). The psychological aspect, explained by Qushayri (d. 1072) in a four-dimensional structure of human consciousness (Qushayri, 1959), is drawn from the Qur'anic reference to *akhfa*, which seems to suggest secret or hidden aspects of human consciousness (Kamada, 2010).

The idea, or reality, of the subtle body was elaborated on in Sufi works as early as the tenth century. Prior to this, it can be said that all Sufis were aware of the magnificence of the subtle body, which was limited only to their imagination and their expression of it in lyrical verse or ecstatic utterances later recorded by Sufi chroniclers (Mojaddedi, 2001). For instance, it can be deduced that the early Sufi

female mystic of Basra, Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801), knew of aspects of the subtle body when saying, "*It is the Lord of the house I need, what have I to do with the house?*" When asked to come outside to witness the works of God, she replies, "*Come you inside that you may behold their Maker. Contemplation of the Maker has turned me aside from what He has made*" (Smith, 1978, p. 219). The allusion made to the 'house' and to 'outside' and 'inside' can be read as implying the degrees of the subtle body – that is, in short, saying that the ultimate expression of the divine is within. That God is found at the centre of being was never a great mystery to the mystic, but the idea was quite clearly forwarded by Meher Baba (d. 1969) by way of his theory of 'involution' (Baba, 1973). In other words, for Meher Baba the 'soul' evolves from a state of mineral to its final physical form as human (the height of the soul's physical expression), from which it is then possible to go 'within' (as a kind of inward ascension) through to God. This is an important conceptual methodology peculiar to the works of Attar, already documented in the twelfth century, and elaborated by Rumi in verse – using the same imagery of transformation – in the thirteenth. How appropriate, then, to locate the source of Sufi mystical understanding in the hadith qudsi, *I [God] was a hidden treasure and I longed to be known, so I created the creation that I may be known*. Indeed, how controversial. According to Ibn Taymiyya, this particular citation is disputed as it is authenticated through [Sufi] *kashf* (insight), and not a recognised chain of transmission.

The concept of the subtle body is certainly not original to Sufism (nor Islam for that matter), as it belongs to a wider, more ancient scope of spiritual philosophy. Yet Sufis by the ninth and tenth centuries had become adept in formulating their own theories on the subject. The Sufis drew predominantly on the Qur'an and hadith to validate their spiritual worldview, but it would seem that the Sufi notion of the subtle body was mainly inspired through extra-canonical material, since it is not Qur'anic in origin. The influence of Neo-Platonism is the most recognised factor, influencing the early Islamic philosophers and interpreters of Qur'an, such as Avicinna and Averoes. For instance, Proclus' three-tiered system, echoed in Hujwiri – Spirit (*ruh*), Lower Soul (*nafs*), and Physical Body (*jasad*) – was the basic model off which most Sufis worked (Hermansen, 1988, p. 7; Nicholson, 1976, pp. 196–200). Another prominent model, originating with Abu Hafs Haddad (d. 879), is the idea of the heart as mediator between *nafs* and *ruh* (Nicholson, 1976, pp. 276–277).

The subtle body in Sufi history

The idea of the subtle body can be traced to ninth-century Iraq, where several early Sufis first cultivated the notion of *latîfas* in the human body. Junayd (d. 910), the grand sheikh of Baghdad, is perhaps the most recognised figure of early Sufism to have formulated important ideas about subtle centres, but his contemporaries were equally important to its development in Sufism. Basra was host to a small group of remarkable Sufis who consisted of Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896), Amr ibn Uthman al-Makki (d. 909), and Hussein ibn Mansour

al-Hallaj (d. 922). According to Al-Tustari there are two forms of 'subtle substance' associated with the individual. The first gives life to the natural self and the second is linked to the spiritual self. The latter is acquired by Sufi meditation (*dhikr*) (Böwering, 1980, pp. 244–245; cited in Buehler, 1998, p. 106, n. 31). Amr al-Makki imagined *latîfas* as though veils encased in one another, for example, the *nafs* in *qalb*, *qalb* in *ruh*, and *ruh* in *sirr*, which were successively removed as one got closer to God (Massignon, 1982, 3:17).[3] Al-Hallaj, in like fashion, portrays Muhammad in the night ascension (*mi'raj*) shedding one subtle covering (*latîfa*) of his soul for each heaven he passed through (Massignon, 1982, 1:14, n. 78).

All the above figures conceived of the *latîfas* as 'subtle bodies' or coverings which the self or soul progressed through by way of prescribed spiritual practices. Later in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, a more specific notion of the subtle body as spiritual 'organs' connected to the human body is expressed by Abu Abdurrahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and Shihabuddin Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234). Najmuddin Kubra (d. 1221) examined the finer workings of the subtle body that was grounded in a tripartite system of the heart, spirit, and mystery, perceived as an internal human phenomenon (Buehler, 1998, p. 107). His pupil, Najmuddin Razi (d. 1256), further elaborated the philosophy of subtle bodies into a pentad (Buehler, 1998, p. 108). A transmitter of the Kubrawi tradition, Ala-uddawla Simnani (d. 1336) produced a seven-tiered model of the subtle body and presented the correlation between the seven *latîfas* and seven colours, seven prophets, seven spiritual types, and seven levels of the cosmos (Corbin, 1971, 3:275–355; cited in Buehler, 1998, p. 108). However, it is not until the nineteenth century that we have a discernible colour association with the notion of a seven-fold nature of the human being (Buehler, 1998, p. 109f).

An understanding of the concept of the *latîfas* in Sufism is very much dependent on the functional context that is examined. Nevertheless, a common factor that remains consistent is the Sufi use of *latîfa* as a heuristic device for the disciple to advance through spiritual realms (Buehler, 1998, p. 112). In this way, the Sufi system of the subtle body is rather analogous to other South Asian systems, the Buddhist tantric 'diamond body' (*vajrakaya*) (Buehler, 1998, p. 112).

The refinement of these systems is indicative of the sophistication of the Sufi politics of the body in developing systems that were simultaneously within the Islamic framework and independent from it. The Sufi subtle body systems were inspired by foreign ideas that preceded them. Non-Sufi groups, strictly speaking, such as the Karramiyya and Malamatiyya of Khurasan, were among many who prescribed their own methods, but gradually superseded by the newly rising 'Sufi' authority (from Baghdad) as the legitimate mystical tradition of Islam. A major part of the Sufi politics of the body was, therefore, the production of systematic narrative or my reference to 'conceptual methodology' that fed into the experience of religion in the body. The newly developing Sufi subtle body system was particularly powerful because it favourably aligned itself with the spread of Islamisation.

Extracts on the *jismi latif* (the subtle body) in early Sufi history

Abu Bakr Wasiti (d. 932), also nicknamed a 'soaring minaret', earned his fame due to his contribution to Islamic mysticism and metaphysics; he was the first to bring the Baghdad Sufi tradition to Khurasan (Silvers, 2010). Hujwiri notes him as an authority on one of the aspects of the subtle body, the 'spirit' (Nicholson, 1976, p. 265). Wasiti explains there are ten stations (*maqâmât*) of spirits, at the head of which is the spirit of dervishes. These depict Wasiti's vision of spiritual maturity and nearness to God, which is worth relating in full, but for the sake of brevity only a sample is offered, followed by a summary:

> […] (1) the spirits of the sincere (*mukhlisân*), which are imprisoned in a darkness and know not what will befall them; (2) the spirits of pious men (*parsâ mardân*), which in the heaven of this world rejoice in the fruits of their actions and take pleasure in devotions, and walk by the strength thereof; (3) the spirits of disciples (*muridân*), which are in the fourth heaven and dwell with the angels in the delights of veracity, and in the shadow of their good works […]
>
> (Nicholson, 1976, p. 265)

Wasiti goes on to record that next come "the spirits of the beneficent" (*ahl-i minan*) who are hung in lamps of light on the throne of God, defined by mercy, favour, and proximity. Next, the "the spirits of the faithful" (*ahl-i wafâ*) who are the pure and elect; "the spirits of martyrs" (*shahîdân*) who are free to roam paradise. The last four stations take us through the final sequence of the psycho-spiritual stations and toward annihilation of the ego. Thereby "the spirits of those who yearn" (*mushtâqân*) are clothed in light and divine attributes, whilst the spirits of gnostics (*'ârifân*) hear only the word of God. Then comes "the spirits of lovers" (*dustân*) who perceive nothing but God in all that they do, and, lastly, "the spirits of dervishes" who having become annihilated are utterly transformed in both "quality" and "state" (Nicholson, 1976, p. 265).

Another mystic of Baghdad, Sumnun al-Muhibb ('the lover') ibn Hamza al-Basri (d. 900), held 'love' to be the "foundation and principle of the way to God"; a peculiar doctrine among Baghdadi Sufis, since Sumnun asserted that every 'state' and 'station' experienced by the Sufi is actually the 'stages of love', and that every stage and abode of the Sufi is destructible except the abode of love which is indestructible so long as God wills the way to Him to exist (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309). Sumnun's controversial placing of love as the superior method to God revealed one of the treasured secrets of the Sufis, which the other sheikhs preferred to remain hidden. Although they agreed with him about the importance of love, they replaced the term 'love' with terms like 'purity' and 'poverty' (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309).

Amr al-Makki (d. 909), an 'austere mystic' primarily concerned with the "strict observance of ritual practices" was true to the Baghdadi Sufi tradition of 'sobriety' over intoxication (*sukr*) (Massignon, 1982, p. 37). In his work, *Kitab al-Mahabbat* ("The Book of Love"), he gives us a wonderful allegory of the 'fall' using the

example of the subtle bodies. Al-Makki's model consists of the three-tiered system of heart, spirit, and soul, but adding the body as the final layer in which all three are contained. It seems he wants his readers to know that spirituality is, in and of itself, inevitably flawed with pride. It is adherence to ordained customs that promotes healthy mysticism – all but promoting the Baghdadian agenda of maintaining a Sufi orthodoxy. Al-Makki's intriguing arrangement of the *latîfas* is certainly worth closer examination; suffice here to give only a brief overview of his vision.

In his book, al-Makki mentions that the hearts (*sirrhâ*) were the first to be created, followed by the spirits (*janhâ*) and souls (*dilhâ*) – each 7000 years apart (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309). Note the Apostolic tradition, "God created the spirits two thousand years before the bodies", also offered by Hujwiri elsewhere in his book (Nicholson, 1976, p. 263). Each of these is then specified a degree of proximity in relation to God. The hearts were kept in the degree of union (*wasl*); the spirits were kept in the degree of intimacy (*uns*); and the souls were kept in the degree of proximity (*qurb*) (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309). Now when God bestowed upon them the esteem of His attention, they "were filled with vanity and pride" in knowing of their exclusivity. Al-Makki says God revealed the "epiphany of His beauty to the heart three hundred and sixty times every day" and again "bestowed on it three hundred and sixty looks of grace"; then, he caused the spirits to "hear the word of love" and finally "manifested three hundred and sixty exquisite favours of intimacy to the soul". Next, al-Makki explains the purpose behind the subtle centres within the human body. They are intermingled as part of a probationary period, being encased in one another and then confined to physical form, for God "imprisoned the heart in the spirit and the spirit in the soul and the soul in the body" (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309). Following this, God mixed reason (*aql*) with them, and sent prophets and gave commands, until each of them were awakened to their flaw and began to seek their 'original station' and lastly, prayer was made incumbent (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309). Here one cannot help but notice the parallel with the Prophet's ascension, since God also gives Muhammad the command to pray. So it is that al-Makki tells us, "the body betook itself to prayer, the soul attained to love, the spirit arrived at proximity to God, and the heart found rest in union with Him" (Nicholson, 1976, p. 309).

The theme of lover and beloved in Ahmad Ghazali and Rumi

As the proponents of mainstream Sufism lay the foundations of the path of mystical Islam, the deeper secrets of the innermost path – its mysticism – were kept alive in the works of those less belonging to the mainstream. Such were the champions of the 'school of love' in the Sufi tradition. The fruits of their efforts meant that whilst within the confines of Sufism, they carved out a further layer of independence and authority vis-à-vis the systematic methods of Sufi subtle body.

At this stage, it would be rewarding to have a glimpse at just one of the many notable figures of the Khurasani Sufi tradition, the brother of the renowned Imam Ghazali (d. 1111), Ahmad Ghazali (d. 1126). He spoke of three worlds or stages

(singular, *manzil*): *dil* (heart), *ruh* (spirit), and *sirr* (mystery), through which the Sufi passed (Purjavadi, 1979, p. 208, cited in Buehler, 1998, p. 107, n. 32). In true antinomian Sufi style, it is perhaps enough to view his analogy of the moth as presented in his *Sawanih al-'ushshaq* ("The Intuitions of Lovers"), summarised by Henry Corbin:

Corbin notes: "When love really exists, the lover becomes the nourishment of the Beloved; it is not the Beloved who is the nourishment of the lover […]" So when "the moth which has become the lover of the flame" is nourished, yet at a distance by the light, the moth must, nevertheless, "go on flying until it reaches it [the flame]". Once there, the moth "can no longer advance *towards* the flame". At this moment, the very essence of Ghazali's verse is revealed: for he tells us that it is "the flame which advances *within*" the moth. Now to explain the opening lines, the "flame is not nourishing the moth; the moth is nourishing the flame". Still, the last lines yield the true mystery of Ghazali's insight when he explains that "for a fleeting instant" the moth "becomes its own Beloved (since it *is* the flame). And in this it is made perfect" (Corbin, 1993, p. 201).

Apropos, the above is the first treatise on the Sufi doctrine of love written in the Persian language. Ahmad Ghazali extends the bounds of traditional Sufism by touching on comparative themes (as invoked through the language) from Persia's religious past, which, incidentally, by the eleventh and twelfth centuries had been a more consistent feature of (Persian) Sufism (Milani, 2013). This is important when noting the sudden further development of the concept of the subtle body in Sufism during this period.

However, it is the mystic and poet, Rumi (d. 1273), who by far is the standard bearer of the 'Sufism of love' as well as being the only Sufi to achieve international fame by transcending the classical period and having his philosophy revitalised in the modern era. His renowned book of spiritual poems, the *Mathnawi*, contains many colourful examples of the subtle body. In one story, Rumi explains the relationship between the subtle bodies through a love story between a king (*ruh*) and a handmaiden (*nafs*). This story is both pertinent, since Rumi acts as a departure point to Sufism in the modern time, and also because the story itself underlines the significant role of the spiritual guide in the awakening of the subtle bodies in the novice Sufi. A summary of the tale is given in the following paragraph:

The story opens with a king who is out hunting and has a chance encounter with a beautiful maiden. He falls helplessly in love with her and takes her back to his palace. Before long she falls ill and the king is distraught at the court physicians' inability to cure her. The king, by this time, willing to forego his stature and wealth for the sake of the girl, desperately searches for a cure. Unsuccessful, the king falls before God and pleads with God to cure his beloved; that night he is told through a dream that a certain sage will be sent to help him. The next day the sage arrives and immediately identifies the girl's ailment. It turns out that the girl was love-sick, wanting to be with a certain goldsmith in another village. The king had promised to place his trust in the sage and on his advice, sends for the goldsmith and arranges for the two to be married. The goldsmith, however, did not come for the girl but for the promise of riches. He leaves his wife and children in pursuit

of worldly gain. Sure enough, the girl begins to recover but the sage had also instructed that the goldsmith be slowly poisoned. As the goldsmith's good looks fade, so does the maiden's superficial attachment to him. When the goldsmith eventually dies the maiden begins to see the prospect of true love with the king (Rumi; Nicholson, 1982, pp. 6–17).

The decipherment of the story lies in the hidden symbolism that is carefully threaded by Rumi.[4] As for the meaning, it will be left open for interpretation. The girl represents the soul (*nafs*), while the king is the spirit (*ruh*). The courtly physicians are made to represent the rational intellect. The goldsmith symbolises worldly attachment. The sage, however, is 'the perfect man' (*insane al-kamil*) or Sufi saint who is capable of guiding the soul to its higher purpose. Rumi places special emphasis on the mediation of the sage in the story. The helplessness of the king (despite his stature and power) "is another insightful analogy demonstrating the love of God for Man, but also Man's distraction with worldly prospects" (Milani, 2014, p. 65).

By Rumi's time, the Sufi position on the transformation of the soul was made clear. The soul (identified with the *nafs*) was not 'bad'; it just had to be trained. Another development in Sufism by the Middle Ages was the pivotal role of a living master. So much so that by Rumi's time only a Sufi master could properly direct a novice through the transition phase. The total obedience and submission of initiates to a single master is the essential theme of Rumi's poetry. It is also the driving message of his work, since both the *Mathnawi* and *Diwan-e Shams* were accounts of the secrets of love between a master and his disciple (Rumi confesses his intention in the first book of the *Mathnawi*). The emphasis placed on the state of nature and the important role of the 'expert', as it were, become the means by which the experience of religion in the body is regulated. The state of play in the politics of the body in Sufism takes shape as a result of vying for power between rival fraternities and between Sufi leaders and the ulama. Finally, the particulars of the politics of the body are noted easily enough in the example of Ahmad Ghazali's enflamed moth. The experience he describes is so profound that it communicates the intensity with which the relationship between master and disciple unfold.

Subtle body systems in Sufi thought

The Qur'an makes mention of three stages of the soul's transformation that feature in three separate *surahs*. The Sufis, on the other hand, have made good use of these passages by linking them into a coherent system of purification: the commanding soul (*nafs ammara*), the blaming soul (*nafs lawwama*), and the soul at peace (*nafs mutma'inna*). The first stage indicates the urge of the lower soul to have its way. In Sufism, the 'lower soul' usually associates with the 'ego' or 'carnal' self, suggesting the lowest point of human awareness. The second stage represents the soul's acknowledgement and reproach of its base nature, signified by the gradual growth of awareness. The third and final stage denotes the level at which the soul is in compliance with divine will and sees the signs of God reflected within – a level signified by the height of awareness.

The Sufis quickly refined these early ideas into a sophisticated ontology – to be dissolved in the Godhead (*fana fi'llah*) and to subsist through His attributes (*baqa bi'llah*) (Rahman, 2010). The doctrine of *fana o baqa*, or 'annihilation and subsistence', which is central to Sufism, is built on the earlier Sufi refinements of the stages of the *nafs* in the Qur'an. The idea was first cultivated by the Khurasanian Sufi Bayazid al-Bistam (d. 874), and since then it was gradually made the principle tenet of the Sufi tradition (Nicholson, 1994, p. 77). Hand in hand with this principle went the doctrine of altruism, also an early development in Sufism that appropriated the chivalric ideal (*javanmardi*) and cultural etiquette (*adab*) (Ridgeon, 2010, p. 3ff).

Accordingly, in Sufism, the idea of the subtle body is essentially about the transformation of the self (*nafs*), the Sufis explaining this by a basic three-tiered system of soul (*nafs*), heart (*qalb*), and spirit (*ruh*). Such is the classical view found in the expressions of the ninth to the thirteenth century. Rumi wittingly uses the example of the vision of the "heart's eye" (the subtle organ capable of beholding "such a palace") being barred by "one stray hair". His advice, remove the hair that you may have a chance. Then revealing what is possible, indeed that which is the aim of the spiritual quest:

> *Muhammad, purged of fire and smoke's last trace*
> *Whichever way he turned saw just God's face*.
>
> (Rumi; Mojaddedi, 2003, p. 88)

Rumi was not only a keen mystic, but also an astute theologian; note the last verse (above), which is a clever hint to the Qur'anic verse "*Whichever way you turn there is the face of God*" (Qur'an 2:115). Rumi's allusion to the subtle body here, which fits in with the model of Abu Hafs (see p. 000), carries the classical Sufi view of the subtle body as a concept that primarily concerns itself with self-transformation. Moreover, transforming the *nafs* is based on freedom from lust (one of the aspects of the lower self), an idea that comprises the basic early Sufi attitude of disciplining the soul in order to gain a measure of proximity with God. Rumi, who was sharply aware of his Sufi forebears, reflects the attitude of Suhrawardi maqtul (d. 1191) who said, "Once the soul is purified, it will be illuminated by divine light" (Suhrawardi, [1945] 1993, p. 184).

The subtle body can be pinpointed in Sufi works with desired accuracy. The idea of *latifa* originates in the ninth century CE where it began as a generic 'subtle substance' before it was defined functionally as a 'subtle body' (Buehler, 1998, p. 107). It wasn't until the eleventh century CE that the idea of *latifa* became a localised 'subtle entity' or 'organ' within the human body (Buehler, 1998, p. 107). Still, it remains difficult for one to procure a coherent image of the subtle body in Sufi thought, even though a copious amount of Sufi works are on hand. Yet there is good reason for why it is complex. Sufism by nature has always maintained a certain degree of elusiveness when it comes to its doctrinal and practical methods, truly living up to its label of mysticism. The Sufi works, therefore, mostly 'hint' or 'allude' to deeper matters, never revealing too much on any subject, allowing

the reader to apprehend certain truths in their own good time. Even Hujwiri's grand corpus entitled, *kashf al-mahjoub* ("Revelation of Secrets"), which sets out to literally reveal all manner of Sufi secrets (and of course to settle accounts with pretenders to the Sufi name), would be of little value to the adherent who knew naught by way of having spiritually 'tasted' truth to some degree. The message is that Sufis see no point in revealing more than the seeker can digest, and this is nowhere better illustrated than the saying of Hasan-i Basri in reply to his audience who demanded he deliver his speech in the absence of Rabia: "That wine which we've made for the capacity of elephants cannot be poured into the chest of ants" (Nurbakhsh, 1980, p. 9). A candid report comes from the Naqshbandi shaikh, Faqirullah Shikarpuri who admits the complexity of the subtle body but says reassuringly, "[…] their appearance depends on the differing capacities of those travelling on the path (*salikin*)". Therefore, to make it easy for wayfarers some sheikhs established points in the body where the subtle centres can be located (Buehler, 1998, p. 111; Shikarpuri, 1978, p. 565).

Next is the question of the meaning of the term *lata'if* as either 'stages' within a quasi-physical body or 'realms' of ascension, which may, of course, affect a reading of the Prophet's *mi'raj* (heavenly ascent). Several passages in the Qur'an hint at the Prophet's transportation to the 'furthest mosque' and his ascent to the seventh heaven (17:1, 81:19–25, 53:12–18). What is later made clear in Muslim sources is that there are seven layers and associated with each are the prophets of the Old Testament. The orthodox view is that this was a bodily experience in which Muhammad was awake (Schrieke et al., 2010, p. 97). In contrast, mystics and philosophers have favoured the allegorical interpretation (Schrieke et al., 2010, p. 97). For the Sufis, the ascension of the Prophet is "the rise of the soul from the bonds of sensuality to the heights of mystic knowledge" (Schrieke et al., 2010, p. 97). The Sufi view tends to imply an internal experience with regard the ascension. In this light, a reading of the account of the ascension becomes a ready description of the subtle body as 'stages' within the quasi-phsyical body in Islamic Mysticism. On the other hand, it is very easy to read the account as though it were of the soul's travelling through subtle 'realms' beyond the material plane. The hadith give a more coherent account, making sense of the earlier Qur'anic allusions; but they are again made sense through the mystical imagination of Sufis.

The event of the Prophet's ascension begins in Mecca (in the neighbourhood of the Ka'ba), where Gabriel awakens Muhammad from sleep and directs him to the winged creature, *burâq*. Together they journey to Jerusalem, from whence the ascent takes place. Accompanied by Gabriel, at each level Muhammad meets a certain prophet. Narrated by Anas ibn Malik, tradition mentions, in order of appearance, from the first to the seventh heaven, the prophets appearing and conversing with Moahmmed: Adam, John the Baptist and Jesus, Joseph, Enoch, Aaron, Moses, and Abraham – beyond which, not even Gabriel ventures, for Muhammad alone is made to converse with God (Colby, 2006, 2008). The story is suggestive of the necessary role of divine assistance during the Prophet's ascension. First we have the assistance of *burâq* and then Gabriel, until arriving at the vicinity of God's domain (beyond the heavens) where only Muhammad is permitted to enter.

Buehler also raises the question as to whether a *latîfa* is a 'place' or a 'subtle body' (Buehler, 1998, p. 112). He mentions that some Sufis (the Mujaddidis) "mention travelling in a certain *latîfa*". He cites one Sufi (Simnani) in particular who "postulated ten *latîfas* emanating from the Essence while discussing the subtle, acquired body moving through these *latîfas*" (Buehler, 1998, p. 112). Buehler presents the notion, and I agree with him, that "the body or sheath a human being occupies at a given moment determines the corresponding ontological reality" (Buehler, 1998, p. 113). In other words, as we develop these subtle bodies or learn to move between them at will, we can experience different realities, but ultimately, access to each of these "various levels of the cosmos are inside each human being"; the person has to go "inside" from "subtle body to subtle body" (Buehler, 1998, p. 113). In another way, Shikarpuri mentions, "as the disciple eliminates veils to receive more light, he or she enters an enlightened existence (*wujud-i nurani*), presumably closer to God" (Buehler, 1998, p. 112, n. 51; Shikarpuri, n.d., p. 236). This last example resembles that of Attar's Seven Valleys in his *Mantiq al-Tayr* ("Conference of the Birds").

Correspondingly, Fariduddin Attar in the twelfth century presented the didactic tale of a large congregation of birds who, inspired by their leader, the hoopoe, set out to meet the king of birds, the *Simurgh*. The birds are compelled to journey through seven valleys, each of which represents the stations a Sufi novice must traverse in order to realise the true nature of God. The valleys are set out as follows: Quest (*talab*), Love (*eshq*), Gnosis (*ma'rifat*), Detachment (*istighnah*), Unity (*tawhid*), Bewilderment (*Hayrat*), and Poverty (*faqr*). In the end only thirty birds or *si-murgh* remain, since others had become victim to their own vice and had perished along the way. The thirty birds discover their king through reflection of their own self in the lake (hence, *si-murgh* [*Simurgh*] a witty play on words), thus affirming the intrinsic Sufi view of the God within (Davis, 1984).

Prior to Attar, in the eleventh century, Qushayri's four-dimensional structure of human consciousness is probably the most popular among the different schemes of *latâ'if* used by the Sufis. His model works off the three-tiered system of soul, heart, and spirit, but brings into play the fourth component of the 'inmost consciousness/secret' (*sirr*). This last level is properly understood as the "deepest dimension of human consciousness" and a place of contemplation and unification where one is able to realise "enlightenment with a divine encounter" (Kamada, 2010). Here interpreting *latâ'if* as 'inner subtleties', Kamada suggests a psychological reading that draws on the Qur'anic mention of the words *sirr* and *khafi* (*akhfa*). Once again, the theme that is presented in all the models previewed indicates a movement 'within', which then admits to the probability of travelling inward to transcend.

The subtle body in modern Sufism

There are several key collections addressing modern Sufism and its relationship with traditional Islam. For example, the work of Howell and Bruinessen, *Sufism and the 'modern' in Islam* (2007), is significant in showing how western Sufi

movements have pushed the boundaries of traditional Islam through their extraordinary ability to adapt their teachings and accommodate for a western audience. This puts into question the congruency of modern Sufism and Islam, but we can be assured that the attitude of modern Sufis is far from inconsistent. Recent research, including Raudvere and Stenberg's collection, *Sufism today* (2009), highlights the ingenuity of Sufi orders and movements in finding their feet in modern contemporary society. Many examples are drawn from around the globe to illustrate the development of contemporary Sufism such as found in contemporary Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, North Africa, and India. As can be imagined the material on the subject is vast, covering the intricacies of Sufism in the abovementioned societies, and remaining beyond the immediate concern of this book. It would be useful, however, to highlight the views of just four major figures of the early twentieth and twenty-first century – Inayat Khan, Meher Baba, Javad Nurbakhsh, and Robert Frager. All of these exemplify the power of subtle body systems and the discerning engineers behind their rehabilitation in the contemporary experience. Each case study is evidence of the manner in which Sufi masters have navigated the field of power.

One of the chief figures of modern Sufism is Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927), who introduced Sufism to the West during his travels in the early twentieth century. Along with his wife, Ameena Begum, he founded a new Sufi order, Universal Sufism, which promoted spirituality as the basis for the unity of religions. Inayat Khan translated the Sufi notion of *baqa* as 'Perfection', where he says in his book, *A Sufi message of spiritual liberty*, that it is the highest condition available which was taught to the world by ancient sages (Khan, 1914, p. 27–28). He defines *baqa* as the original state of God, a state achievable through practices of concentration. Using traditional language, these practices would in turn allow the seeker to pass through four stages of development: *fana fi'l-shaikh* (annihilation in the astral plane), *fana fi'l-rasul* (annihilation in the spiritual plane), and *fana fi'llah* (annihilation in the abstract), the final stage being the state of *baqa bi'llah* (annihilation in the eternal consciousness). Colour association was recognised by Inayat Khan but not central to his model of subtle bodies. Music, instead, was to play the central role in Inyat Khan's system of morphology. As a master musician, he was aware of the mystery of tone and rhythm and its influence on the human soul. For Inayat Khan, sacred music was able to touch the heart and illuminate the soul. The power of music was to awaken the memory of the soul to its origin – God. Music was 'food for the soul'.

Another important contributor to the development of modern Sufism was Meher Baba (d. 1969) who founded the American Sufi order, Sufism Reoriented, in 1952. Meher Baba's metaphysics uniquely incorporated Vedanta, Sufism, and Christianity (Baba, 1973). His system of the subtle body paralleled that of his view on reincarnation and God-realisation; that is, Meher Baba talks about the soul's pursuit of liberation as the evolution of the imminent divine consciousness. He mentions six 'kingdoms' – stone/metal, vegetable, worm, fish, animal, and human – through which the soul experiences what is required for the next level of awakening. However, only the final stage, in human form, allows access to the soul's own divinity

(Purdom, 1964). This is possible through the process of what Meher Baba calls 'Involution', or what he describes as journeying within (Baba, 1973, p. 40).

Other developments in Sufism in the modern era are worth mentioning here, such as the transplantation of several traditional Sufi orders to the West. These include variations of the Naqshbandis, Chishtis, Qadiris, Mevlevis, Alawis, Shadhilis, and Tijanis (Geaves, 2006, p. 142). The Nimatullahis, on the other hand, have proven an interesting case study, since they – the Nimatullahi Khaniqahi, more than any other group – have disassociated themselves from the main body of Islam (Lewisohn, 2006). Both in their use of terms and expressions of Sufi concepts, the Nimatullahis discretely re-invented themselves by envisioning the roots of Sufism in the Persian (pre-Islamic) past. Formerly a psychologist, Javad Nurbakhsh, the late master or *pir* of the order, formulated the classical Sufi concept of the subtle body that reflected a Zoroastrian model. He mentions the world as the battle ground between the two forces, the *nafs* and spirit, who are both aiming to apprehend the heart (Nurbakhsh, 1996, p. 42). He offers a five-tiered model of the subtle body which is presented in order of ascension or introspection (that is, going within oneself): *nafs*, heart, spirit, inner consciousness, and innermost consciousness (Nurbakhsh, 1993, p. 3).

Also in the domain of Sufism and psychology, Robert Frager deserves mention, since he wrote extensively on Sufi psychology, especially with regard to the relationship between the subtle bodies and the self (Frager, 1999). An American-born and trained psychologist, Frager converted to Islam through his contact with the Helveti Jerrahi Sufi order. He edited and wrote the introduction to *Love is the wine: talks of a Sufi master in America* by Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak (d. 1985), under his converted name and title, Sheikh Ragip Frager.

Sufi representations of the subtle body gradually developed in the ninth century and had been formulated into elaborate systems by the modern era. Prior to this, and very much due to the mystical nature of Sufism, the subtle centres remained a hidden and integrated aspect of Sufi theosophy. Given that the idea does not originate in the Qur'an, it was only with gradual freedom of expression that the Sufis were able to delineate a codified system of subtle bodies. Interestingly, however, the concept of a subtle body had always been discernible in early Sufism, going back to the early ninth century among the Sufis of Basra. But an interest in subtle bodies as a colour-coded system associated with levels of prophetic avatars was definitely a later nineteenth-century development, probably due to "generations of mystical activity over centuries of experimentation" (Buehler, 1998, p. 111). It is likely for there to have been borrowings from Tantric Yoga (Whitcomb, 1993, p. 113), but the fact that the *latifas* do not correlate with the human body in the way that chakras do (Dale, 2009, p. 240) is perhaps proof of independent development.

From the earliest allusions to the subtle bodies it is clear that the Sufis were concerned with the refinement of Islamic cosmology. In their literature, the Sufis are especially concerned with divine union, which subsequently leads them to discussions on the 'method' of ascent and, oftentimes, the reasons for descent. Rumi indeed notes that God had provided his creation with a ladder to climb, step by step, towards Him (*Mathnawi*, Book I, lines 930ff).[5]

For the Sufis, there is a persistent preoccupation with the 'return' of the soul to its divine source. And in this, there are no misgivings about the Islamic nature of this notion rooted in the text of the Qur'an (for instance, 2:156). The Sufis, always carefully instructed under the guidance of a master of the path, were more or less left to their own devices, albeit in a controlled environment; that is, the *Khaniqah* or Sufi House. Despite there being many variations of the subtle body system in Sufism both between and within different orders, it is possible to identify a generic model within the Sufi tradition – the three-tiered system of soul, heart, and spirit combination.

Politics of the subtle body

The development of the subtle body systems in Sufism corresponds with the evolution of Sufi political activity. Subtle body methods, or methods for the control of the experience of religion in the body, demonstrated another powerful aspect of Sufi political intervention. In this sense, Sufi political intervention was defined by the politics of the body in the context of the experience of religion in body. This was constituted by the way that Sufis presented themselves to society through their attire, the way they behaved, and the way they spoke. These systems were a way of managing their own understanding of Islam as a system of self-transformation. The outpouring of their experience was through the social body they presented. Yet, more importantly, these systems also allowed the emerging Sufi leaders to not only establish their own methods as the mystical standard in Islam, but also to carve out their own domain in the politics of religion within Islam. They stamped their mark in the field of power not only as masters of the path, but also by controlling and dominating the very experience of religion as a lived reality through the body of their subjects. In the case of Sufism, religion in the body is the production of a specific persona that is bound by oath to the master. The subtle body systems ensured its success.

This final chapter brings to the fore a vivid picture of the measure of influence that Sufism had within the world of Islam. The subtle body systems are not just an extrapolation of Sufi spiritual methodology. They are also a demonstration of their soteriological conviction. The Sufi belief systems depended upon the interpretations of the subtle body as outlined in detail throughout this final chapter. They would define Sufism within Islam, and Sufi groups from each other. This too was a measure of subservience to the master and to the creed of the order. The experience of religion in the body of the initiate was determined by the power of the subtle body doctrine. This was the measure of the lived experience of the Sufi; the power of religion in the body.

Notes

1 This chapter is in part a reproduction of Milani (2013).
2 The present author recognises, and is grateful to, the scholarly efforts of Marcia K. Hermansen and Arthur F. Buehler on the subject of the subtle body (see text).
3 Nafs = lower nature; qalb = heart; ruh = spirit; sirr = inner secrets.
4 The interpretation of the story is thoroughly documented in two essays. See Safavi (2005, p. 45), and see also Nurbakhsh (1991, pp. 7–10).
5 Nicholson, book I of the *Mathnawi* (1982, p. 52).

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10 Conclusion

Reflections on Sufi activity in civic society today

As socio-political agents, Sufis and Sufi orders have functioned as an alternative to other forms of social agency. Sufism as a 'source of force' in both social and political activity defines Sufi engagement in both contemporary and historical settings that offers an alternative to two others: the secular and conservative/radical Islamic traditions. Sufis were a leading example of Muslim faith, drawing their inspiration from the Prophet whom they saw as the mystic par excellence. Yet none of this was to preclude Sufis from drawing inspirations from elsewhere (outside of Islam). The Sufi effort to expand the boundaries of Islamic understanding is legendary; so too is their determination to advance the cause of Islam. Still, their proclivity for innovation is the mark of Sufi industry. With the emergence of Sufism as a newly formed mystical movement in the ninth century, and then a fully fledged tradition within Islam by the twelfth, leading Sufi figures were at the forefront of a then flourishing Muslim world. The contribution of Sufis to the growing Muslim world gained converts for Islam and the perpetuation of the ever-expansive experience of Islam and what it means to be Muslim.

I have endeavoured to present Sufism in this book as much a political phenomenon as a mystical one. This is because Sufism is principally located within the Islamic framework. Since the religious and the political domains are observably synonymous enterprises in the unfolding of Islamic history, Sufism too makes little effort to demarcate religion and politics. Sufi social engagement makes no distinction between mystical activity and its socio-political application. Mysticism was as much a mode of political intervention as it was a method for individual development. I support this from historical evidence as well as contemporary Sufi hagiographies and literary productions. The main methodical approach of the project has been historiographical, but a significant portion of this study was substantiated by fieldwork research including a pilot study and several high-profile interviews with leading contemporary Sufi figures of a number of global orders based in Asia. I hope to have made considerable headway in establishing Sufi political activity as an important feature of the wider scope of Muslim political thought, and have argued that Sufi political thought is deserving of its own place as a niche aspect of Islamic intellectual and political history. Sufi political thought as defined here is an independent but interconnected current of Islamic

socio-political consciousness. This is evidenced by a number of case studies – Hallaj, Ayn al-Quzat, and Suhrawardi Maqtul – that purported Sufi political thought as a distinctive phenomenon within Islam.

Throughout the book I have championed the view that Sufi political thought emerges in the context of Islam in Asia. The Islamisation of the Asian continent not only produced new layers on top of northern Arab understandings of their religion, but it also gave rise to the variety of interpretations of the religion of Muhammad across new lands already colonised with centuries-old religious traditions of their own. In the Asian context, greater Iran or western Asia stands out geographically and culturally as the centre stage of Sufi history. I also made strong preference for the case of Iran as part of Asia rather than the Middle East for the simple reason that it has much more in common with its Asian rather than its Arab neighbours. Iran is a geographically and culturally peculiar spot in the region, but also significant for the development of the Sufi tradition and for its role in the instigation of a truly remarkable era of Islamic history. This is not just to take note of the magnificence of a once great Persia, but more so to pinpoint Iranians as the avant-garde of Islam. It is in Iran where Sufi political thought first emerges. Beginning in Baghdad, the political centre of the Muslim world, movements and ideas spread to all regions of the empire's reach. Sufism was one of these movements with its own political ideology. What comprised Sufi political thought was a newly developed mystical theological doctrine accompanied by a political philosophy.

Common perceptions about the political expediency of Sufism require adjusting, since Sufism was never a socially or politically neutral phenomenon. Owed to popular misperceptions of Sufism as merely 'soft' Islam, the role of Sufi political activity was strictly limited to peaceful mediation between 'warring' parties. Sufis and Sufi orders are historically 'diplomatic' to say the least, in their dealings with holders of [military] power, but the range of their activity did not exclude them from asserting their influence where they were present, and when they were summoned. The influence of Sufi masters was far-reaching, both in the historical context and in the contemporary global setting. With literally thousands of initiates under their care, Sufi leaders command an unprecedented degree of respect on both a global and local scale.

The enigma of Sufism and the authority of the Sufi tradition was something of a felt reality in the medieval era. This is exampled by two chapters where Sufi political thought was fleshed out at a micro (intellectual and doctrinal) level. This concerned two novel developments as a result of Sufi innovations in Islam: the production of the mystical persona of Muhammad and the appropriation of Jesus into mystical Islam. In both examples, the power of persuasion was manifest in Sufi political activity. Sufis demonstrated their theological, political, and literary skill in equipping the Islamic tradition with newly developed intellectual apparatus to assert themselves as the leading religious tradition of the time in the face of a prominent theological force of Christian Byzantium. This essentially transpired with constructing 'Muhammad-mysticism' to match and surpass the Jesus Christ of Christendom and to secure Jesus as the augury of Muhammad.

The role of Sufism takes a dramatic turn in the fortunes of Nimatullahi Sufism. Theirs is a prime example of Sufi politics in contemporary global society. I traced the developments of the Nimatullahi Sufi order and its transition from an Iranian organisation to a global network. This traditional Sufi order had adapted to a global setting, whilst retaining a strong connection to its homeland, demonstrated by the promulgation of its myth-history that perpetuated its cultural identity. It had also successfully catered to its non-Iranian followers throughout the world, where the order conformed to the environment it was located. The Nimatullahi, as one of Asia's most ancient and prolific Sufi orders, entered into an intense process of politicisation in Iran during the change of regime in 1979. In this example, the politics of Islam come to a head in the modern setting, reviving the Sufi–ulama quarrel of the middle ages. Furthermore, the independent doctrinal development of a former leader, Javad Nurbakhsh, shifts the emphasis from religious Sufism to ethical Sufism.

From the above, the politics of the body is brought sharply into focus, whereby Sufi political thought engages the very core of human experience as a social creature and as an agent of politics in society. This is a chief concern with the experience of religion in the body. It is manifest in the complex methods of regulating religious experience through subtle body systems. The development of the subtle body systems in Sufism details the evolution of Sufi political activity. Subtle body systems or methods for the control of the experience of religion in the body, as they were developed and refined over time, demonstrated yet another powerful aspect of Sufi political intervention. The subtle body systems worked on the conformity of the disciple to the processes prescribed by the masters who devised the systems or mystical paths to enlightenment. This placed great emphasis on the role of the master and his or her system. These systems allowed the emerging Sufi leaders to determine their own methods as authoritative in the Sufi tradition and to assert themselves as power brokers in Islam.

I have weaved several conceptual threads for further reflection. These pertain to the politicisation of Sufism in the Muslim world, but also the political activity of Sufism both within and beyond the Muslim world with regard to Sufi missionary activity. This is especially emphasised with the exchange between Muslim mystics and Christian ascetics. Here, I have made the case for understanding political Sufism and Sufi political intervention in the context of Christian–Muslim relations. This is because I am convinced that the political nature of the Islamic faith is theological at its core, and it is from this centre that political thought is shaped and subsequently flows. I have tried to locate Sufi political thought in the context of the religio-political interactivity of two titans: Christendom and *dar al-Islam*. I have placed particular emphasis on the importance of the exchange between Christianity and Islam (in their respective domains, and on the hinterland), because my strong impressions are that no other religion other than Christianity has had such an overt impact on the shaping of Muslim polity and theology. To be clear, this process of shaping has taken place more as a reactionary exercise (to Christianity) rather than functioning as a passive recipient. Therefore, I am not asserting that the Muslims borrowed aspects of the Christian religion or that

Christians fashioned Islam to their own liking. Rather, it is the very (often harsh) exchange between the two worlds and its inhabitants that shaped Muslim thinking to a significant degree.

The theological basis of Christianity and Islam is largely situated on questions that enquire about the nature of God. This consequently involves debates around the figure of Jesus from the point of view of both traditions upon which the difference is split. The emerging Christian doctrine has a point of departure from early Judeo-Christian perceptions of Jesus as a charismatic Rabbi. It is an entirely new theology built around the idea that God was made incarnate and was to die in order to demonstrate His absolute compassion and love as the only true redemptive process for His creation. This new theology is the basis of the teachings of the Apostles about *their* experience of Jesus. For Christians, this too is a departure from Judaic monotheism, and which is why it is fully considered a newly developed theology based on 'Christian' experience. Islam, on the other hand, is a continuation of Judaic monotheism, since it upholds the absolute oneness and transcendence of the incomparable Abrahamic God. Yet despite obvious borrowings from Judaism (for example: circumcision, Abrahamic monotheism, emphasis on the written Word of God, and sacred law), it remains that Islam was more directly affected by Christianity in its coming to maturity as a social, political, and theological power.

As part of understanding the context drawn above, I discussed the production of Muhammad's mystical persona as a challenge to the supreme Icon of the Christian faith. Also, I examined the Muslim appropriation of Jesus as a religio-political offset in a bid for power. These were, to be fair, implicit instances of Christian–Muslim exchange. Yet one of the most explicitly demonstrated outcomes of this exchange was the advent of the 'civic monk' as discussed in chapter five. Quite visibly, Islam presents to the world an innovative form of monastic habit. Where the institution of monasticism is forbidden in Islam, a new transportable version of ascetic lifestyle prevails in the social life of the Muslim. It is transportable, because Muslim religious ceremony can be performed anywhere and at any time without the need for Church, elaborate ritual, or the performance of sacraments. This 'protestant' attitude had allowed Islam to fashion transportable holy men not bound to a monastery or to the monastic code of solitude and celibacy. It is upon this form of transportable piety that the Sufi tradition is built and upon which the Sufis capitalise.

While the popular point of attraction to Sufism is an interest in the exotic cultures of the Orient, patrons of the mystical tradition are nevertheless also exposed to the politics of the region. This is because Sufism was initially founded to provide an alternate voice on matters of religion, social benefits, and political asylum. As a global spiritual tradition, the remit of Sufi political intervention is no longer limited by *dar al-Islam*, nor confined to it. Sufi orders operating in a local environment are immediately valued in terms of their ability to mediate, moderate, and manage Islam and Muslim communities on a micro level. Such is the reality of Sufism both historically and in the contemporary setting. Sufi orders function today in their respective societies, as they have in the past, through a nuanced

theological understanding, handling cultural and linguistic diversity, and religious pluralism, whilst utilising their organisational networks to aid charity services and assist in the welfare of the members of their local community (whether Muslim or not).

Whilst Sufism *is* part of Islam, and operates within the broader framework of its milieu, contemporary Sufi communities provide a religious experience that is in parallel to that of the local Muslim communities. As such, significant alternation can be detected between Sufi and Islamic understandings of everyday life outside of Muslim majority countries. Such a state of affairs today does not precipitate a fundamental difference between Sufism and Islam. Yet through the ages Islamic political thought has been shaped by civilisational shifts (both due to its own causing and being affected upon). Muslim political understanding was for the longest time, during the 'golden age', universally influenced and sensitive to cultural change. This was made justifiable on the basis of the universal foundations of the Qur'anic creed. As discussed at length, Islam, the 'open civilisation', embraced diversity among its ranks and made provisions for non-Muslims. Yet the experience of modern history has forced dramatic change upon the political field for Islam. Since the fall of the Ottomons, i.e., the final Muslim empire, and the defection of the Muslim realm (*dar al-Islam*), Islam is no longer in a position of political and military dominance. It is instead the religion and people for whom provisions need to be made in a world overrun by the 'opposition': Christendom. In reality, and furthest from the truth, Islam's bitter response was in reaction to the humiliation under the colonial masters, and later, domination by capitalist financiers. This is where the variation in Sufism from Islam has to be contextualised, because it is Sufism that revives the initial universalist sentiment of Islam and its spirit of accommodation for difference. Yet, granted, its own innovation to this is a newly appropriated religious pluralism, which broadly defines the Sufism of the contemporary era. This Sufi innovation is evidenced by hagiographical materials and present-day Sufi publications that are observable in the digital and real-world activity of the orders. Seen in this light, Sufis today offer their own interpretation of Islam both in terms of historical narrative and in the way that they practice their Islam.

Sufi political thought is also informed by different religious experiences and attitudes as shaped by geography over time. Some of these adjustments still continue to take place where Sufi orders expand their global reach to new locations. Given that Sufi orders are themselves products of geographical specificity, their *mentalité* outside of the Muslim world is to a good degree an extension of the homeland. They are, as such, carriers of a specific cultural ethos, accompanied by their own peculiarities in social and political alignments. Despite this, Sufi orders are tolerant of difference in religious temperament and are receptive to ethnic diversity, which generally makes them more accepting of assorted cultural groups who seek conversion to Islam. However, conversion, on the whole, is not a pressure point for Sufis. Many non-Muslims are indirectly converted to Islam vis-à-vis their attraction to Sufism. Yet, the variation mentioned earlier should be given close attention, because Sufism, it would seem, provides its own special brand

of Islam; it always has. With respect to this point, the 'Sufi houses' (*khaniqah*) continue to function as historic places of refuge from the fiscal world; much like a monastery in the traditional Christian setting. It is in these houses that visitors are made to feel welcomed, and where outsiders are able to partake in and witness the broader rituals of Sufi life. However, more intimate discourses and practices of the Sufi tradition remain strictly reserved for the initiated.

Sufis have survived great social and political upheaval, not to mention the apocalypse of foreign (Mongol and Turkic) invasion. Sufism is by due process endowed with a measure of theological flexibility that cuts through segregation and superficiality. This makes Sufism a socially well-equipped force. To understand Sufism is, in a way, to understand Islam through a more nuanced lens. Still, Sufism is an independent tradition with its own political function. Where Sufism can be measured on the sliding scale of Islamic typology is demonstration of the nature of the beast. Political Sufism is the *tour de force* of Sufi political thought that has maintained the relevance of Sufism's contribution to the unfolding of Islam through the ages.

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